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For Want of a Nail

by the_dala

Summary

When Jack Sparrow is taken ill, his care is overseen by a most unlikely person.

Notes

This is my multi-chaptered Sparrington epic and might still be the longest single work I've ever written. It was written in the winter of 2003/2004 and I'll be uploading chapter by chapter. An important note: Norrington's first name is Gabriel in this fic. Ten years on I honestly don't recall where I came up with that, but hopefully you don't find it terribly distracting. There are some quotes liberally borrowed from other canons and they'll all be credited at the end of the appropriate chapters.

In Which Deals Are Made

One of the things Commodore Gabriel Norrington hated most in the world was being lied to. Elizabeth Turner was a very good liar, but he knew she was hiding something, and he knew exactly what it was – or, more precisely, whom.

The question foremost in Norrington's mind was when it would be polite for him to bring the subject to Elizabeth's attention. So far they had talked only of pleasant things while sitting out in the little garden behind the Turners' shop and home. They had sipped tea and eaten biscuits and it was all very pleasant and felt very English, despite the hot Caribbean sun beating down on the back of his neck. He had asked Elizabeth if she would prefer taking tea inside, mindful of her condition and also of their history, but she had chuckled and assured him that being pregnant give her the perfect excuse to avoid corsets altogether, then hastily apologized when his face turned bright red with embarrassment.

"The crib Will is making for the baby is really quite splendid," she was saying now. "I'll have him show it to you when he gets back from the market. He's carving Noah's ark on either side, with as many animals as he can fit." She smiled at him; she had a very pretty smile which he had loved for all the time he'd known her, but it also reminded him of losing her, so it made him uncomfortable. So, too, did the mention of her husband. He did not want to broach his subject with the both of them present; it would be too much like being outnumbered.

Now, he supposed, was as good a time as any. There was really no kind of segue possible, so he determined to just drop the cannonball.

"I trust you've heard about the *Black Pearl* being seen in these waters not one week ago?"

Her expression didn't falter for an instant. "Oh, surely you don't take such rumors seriously, Commodore?" she said with a laugh. "I believe there are at least two sightings of the *Pearl* a day all throughout the Caribbean ports – three in Port Royal."

"It's no rumor, I assure you, Mrs. Turner," he said stiffly. "I gave chase to her myself."

Elizabeth made a non-committal sound, her eyes fixed on his, seemingly innocuous. Norrington knew better.

"We suspect that it ventured into Port Royal to deposit a certain Captain Jack Sparrow." She raised her eyebrows, blandly curious. "You have not seen him, nor heard word of him?"

"Certainly not," Elizabeth replied with wide, innocent eyes. "Of course you would be the first to hear it if we had, Gabriel."

He disliked hearing his first name on her lips; it wasn't any more proper than his calling her Elizabeth now that she was a married woman, and expecting to boot.

"Hmmm," he said, "even though you are friends with Captain Sparrow?"

"Friend or no," Elizabeth said, pretending to be offended, "we know our duty to the crown."

That was simply too much. "Mrs. Turner," he said, leaning forward over the table, "I am well aware that you and your husband know Sparrow's whereabouts. My men are familiar with the...establishments his crew tends to frequent. I'm shocked that you would attempt to convince me otherwise. I could have William in irons for this!"

She sighed and rolled her eyes. “Honestly, Gabriel, there’s no need to be so dramatic. Yes, we do know where he is.”

Norrington was surprised that she had conceded so easily. He had expected her to lead him down a few more false turns before she admitted the truth.

“You must turn him in,” he insisted. “This isn’t like the last time – I cannot allow Jack Sparrow to escape a second time.”

“Technically, it would be the third time,” Elizabeth pointed out. “Actually, the fourth, since he sneaked into the wedding without your notice.”

Suddenly he was very glad he had not married the girl, beautiful and well-born though she was. “Where is Jack Sparrow hiding, Mrs. Turner?”

“He’s very ill,” she replied calmly. “He is here because his crew was so worried that they felt he needed care on land. He is in no condition to sit on his arse in your drafty jail –“ Norrington dropped his cup onto his saucer in shock, splattering himself with drops of fine tea. “– and I am asking you to show us the mercy that is the chief basis of my respect for you.”

He said nothing. She was looking at him earnestly now, all pretenses dropped; she reached over to clasp his hand. Beneath her straw hat he could see the worry in her eyes.

“Please, Gabriel.” Her voice had dropped low. “I know I have no grounds to ask you for anything, but...I’m asking you to spare him. If you put him in prison under normal circumstances, he would be a free man in less than twenty-four hours, and I guarantee you’d never learn exactly how. But if you do so now, he could be dead in half that time.”

He didn’t want to believe her – it could so easily be a ruse. But just as he had known she was lying before, he knew now that she was telling the truth. For several long moments he hesitated, saying nothing, refusing to respond to the pressure she was exerting on his hand.

Finally he dropped his gaze and said quietly, “All right.”

At that moment Will Turner stepped into the garden, a large paper-covered loaf of bread in one arm. Norrington snatched his hand away from Elizabeth as she stood up to greet her husband with a kiss on the cheek. Will folded her in his free arm, but his eyes were hard and fixed on Norrington.

“Good of you to visit, Commodore,” Will said in a stilted voice. He was not nearly as adept at falsehood as his wife. Elizabeth glanced at Norrington; she knew it too.

“Will,” she said softly, “he knows about Jack. Except that he’s here, just upstairs,” she added with a nod in Norrington’s direction. That was a surprise; a bold move even for the infamous Turners, hiding a pirate in their own quarters.

“What?” Will was trying to appear innocent. “What about Jack? We haven’t seen him or talked to him in months. We don’t have any idea where the *Black Pearl* might be.” It sounded like a routine he’d rehearsed.

Elizabeth made a *tsk* noise. “I told you, Will, he *knows*.”

He glared at her and said, “Will you excuse us for a moment, Commodore?” They ducked inside the smithy.

Will was clenching the bread so hard that it was beginning to crumble. Elizabeth took it from him

and laid it atop an anvil. Diego, the donkey, raised his bright eyes hopefully. She tossed him a few crumbs as Will paced the back doorway of the forge.

“I can’t believe you told him!”

“He knew before I told him, love. And I explained about his illness.”

Will threw his hands up in exasperation. “All the easier for him to haul Jack away!”

“Stop it.” She grabbed him by the wrist as he came striding past her. “Gabriel is a good man, and you know it. He promised he wouldn’t imprison Jack.”

Scowling, Will reluctantly accepted her arms around his neck. “And you believe him.”

“Yes. We can’t keep Jack here with us, Will, you know that. Norrington will be able to find somewhere else to hide him. And this is the safest he could possibly be – if the commodore isn’t looking for him, no one else will be.”

“True,” he conceded grumpily.

Elizabeth snickered. “William Turner, I do believe you’re jealous. Are you jealous?”

“No,” he protested, then admitted, “well, maybe a little. I think perhaps I always will be. He could have given you so much –“

“Ah,” she said, kissing him lightly, “but look at all that *you* have given me.” She placed his hand on her belly and watched as a smile spread over his face.

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Norrington watched this exchange from his seat outside and rubbed his temples, overtaken by a sudden headache. He often got such headaches when he visited the Turners. He blamed it on the sulfurous scent of the forge, but knew it was more than that.

Will and Elizabeth returned, his arm protectively around her waist. His eyes as he met Norrington’s were no longer hostile, but neither were they particularly friendly. It saddened Norrington; he thought that they might have been good friends, if things had not turned out quite the way they turned out. He suspected Will felt the same.

“I have a proposition for you,” he blurted out. They looked at him expectantly and he took a deep breath, wondering if he was finally going mad in this fetid climate. Nothing other than madness would prompt what he was about to say.

“Let me take over care of Jack Sparrow.”

They both began to protest, but Norrington raised a hand, and reluctantly they let him speak.

“You both have much on your minds – I know that you have an extensive list of commissions, Mr. Turner, and there is your coming child to think of. It isn’t fair to burden you with care of an invalid as well, especially when you are not sure of the nature of his illness and what effect it could have on either of you. I have a great deal of free time and I used to spend my summers with an uncle who was a country doctor, so I have a rudimentary knowledge of the profession. If Sparrow is ensconced at my home, I won’t have to turn a blind eye to whomever is bound to see him, should you attempt to conceal him elsewhere. This is why you decided to tell me in the first place, was it not?” Elizabeth nodded, looking as though she was considering his offer.
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“Therefore, I am clearly your best option if you want to keep him safe and alive. And,” he added, “if you don’t agree I could always turn you in as conspirators and lock Sparrow in a cell anyway.”

Will blinked.

Elizabeth pursed her lips. “Perhaps it isn’t the ideal solution...”

“But it seems it’ll have to do,” he finished for her, after they shared a long, measured look.

It had been easier than he’d thought. The notion of keeping Sparrow under his control while he was incapacitated by illness had been the first thought to enter Norrington’s mind when Elizabeth admitted to hiding him. He would be able to keep Sparrow out of any mischief in Port Royal – he could not imagine the man ever being so sick that he would not be able to stir up trouble – and when he recovered, well, frankly the whole deal would have to be renegotiated. Until then, Norrington would have Sparrow right under his nose, and as infuriating a prospect as that seemed, he knew that the advantages far outweighed the disadvantages.

“We’ll take you to him,” Will said at last. Norrington followed the two of them inside.

In Which Jack Discovers His Predicament

Jack was careful to keep his eyes closed as he woke. He could hear another someone in the room, right next to him, and he wanted to glean as much knowledge as possible about this person before he acted.

The room was unpleasantly warm, so he knew that he was either somewhere in summer or in the Caribbean at more or less any time of the year. He heard the unmistakable clink of something hard against glass. A throat clearing marked his companion as male. He began to hum in a low voice, a complicated tune that was vaguely familiar to Jack and definitely not a dirty ballad or a shanty. Probably upper class, then. He sniffed, detecting a faint whiff of cologne. French cologne. Definitely. Well, he had dispatched many a Frenchman over the years, and he didn't think this one would be any trouble.

After the few seconds it took him to process this information, he leapt to his feet, surprising his aristocratic French enemy and upsetting the decanter of cognac beside the bed. He thrust a blade in deep below the man's ribs, grabbed the spirits, and made a run for the open window.

At least that was what happened in Jack's imagination. In reality, he opened his eyes to find Commodore Norrington sitting by his bedside, pouring some pinkish stuff into a small glass. Jack attempted his heroic leap-and-stab, but found himself barely able to raise his head and one arm. Exhausted by the strain, he let his head drop back onto his pillow, eyes darting about the room. He didn't recognize it, but a glance at the orange trees outside the window reconciled with his knowledge of Port Royal's native foliage.

He still felt the oppressive heat, but Norrington was dressed in relatively heavy clothing and was not sweating. Jack could feel warm droplets running from his own brow. He kicked futilely at the quilts covering his prone body.

Norrington -- a man Jack would have been perfectly content to never see again -- was looking at him now, his eyes stern and unforgiving.

"Do you know where you are?" Norrington inquired in a condescending tone that made Jack want very much to hit him.

Of course, he didn't in fact know where he was, so he chose to ignore the question entirely.

"Lemme go!" he growled and was surprised at the immediate pain in his throat. His voice came out in a croak.

Norrington set the bottle and glass on a bedside table with a sigh. "This is going to be so very unpleasant," he muttered to himself. Turning, he called through the open door, "He's awake!"

Elizabeth Turner hurried in and Jack felt somewhat less panicked. The Commodore most certainly shouldn't be here with him – or perhaps it was the other way 'round – but if Elizabeth was present as well, neither of them would be able to turn to bloodshed. Jack figured that he would be rather overcome in his present state of immobility.

"Lizzie," he rasped, "what the hell's going on?"

"That kind of language is inappropriate for –" the Commodore began with a frown.

"Where the devil am I?" Jack continued as if he hadn't heard.

She smiled gently at him and bent over his bed, presenting him with quite a fine sight of her cleavage. Oh, he'd missed that, all right.

"Don't you remember, Jack?"

"I told you he was insensible when we brought him here," Norrington sniffed. Elizabeth shot him a look.

She put a hand to his brow and her fingers were blessedly cool. "You're in Commodore Norrington's house. We've just taken you from our own place."

"Elizabeth," he said in what he felt was an exceedingly patient voice, "I cannot think of one single reason why I would be in the good commodore's place of residence, especially since last we met he tried to hang me." He glared at said commodore, who looked away with the affectation that Jack wasn't important enough to rest one's eyes on.

She turned to Norrington. "Would you mind giving us a moment of privacy, Commodore?"

Norrington cast a side-long glance at Jack. "I would prefer not to leave you alone with...this man, Mrs. Turner." Jack rolled his eyes and noticed with dismay that there was no kohl framing them. His jewelry was likewise missing, though his hair-baubles were still in place. His eyes combed the room, but it was disturbingly bare of any art or furniture – more importantly, it was also bare of his coat, hat, compass, pistol, or sword.

While he was taking a silent inventory of his effects, Elizabeth had apparently convinced the commodore to take his leave, because he stood and exited the room (not, however, before giving Jack a warning look).

Jack fixed his attention on Elizabeth again and noticed the little crease of worry between her brows.

"What is it?" he asked, alarmed. "Is the whelp all right?"

"Yes," she said, giving him a strange look. "It's you, Jack. You're ill. Don't you remember...?" At his blank look she continued: "You've been staying with Will and me for a week now."

Jack sat bolt upright – or tried to, in any case. He made it about halfway, then fell back into the pillows. It was quite humiliating.

He tried to think – Elizabeth and Will, what did their home look like? If she was telling the truth, he'd be able to remember it...

Concentrating, he could feel the memories starting to come back, some of them clear, some of them fogged.

She watched recognition flicker in his eyes and said, "You keep slipping in and out. When we brought you here you were nearly delirious, which is probably why you couldn't remember much at first. Your fever rises and falls as well."

Fever. So that was why he was so uncommonly warm. And although his head felt all right now, if a little fuzzy, he thought he could recall splitting pain centered there. Likewise he could dimly remember vomiting at some point. Several points, in fact.

"Anamaria and Gibbs brought you to us," Elizabeth said. "They couldn't treat you at sea, and you're much too notorious now to be taken to a doctor." She winked at him, but he was too upset to be amused.

“There are crooked surgeons in Tortuga,” he pointed out.

“And it’s a good thing Ana didn’t trust them any more than I would,” she snapped.

Jack lifted an arm to gesture weakly at the room. “Yet here I am in the belly of the beast, so to speak.”

Elizabeth’s face turned resigned as though she’d already had to argue on the commodore’s behalf (which, if Jack knew her husband at all, she probably had). “He’s protecting you, Jack, and he’ll be able to care for you better than Will or I could.”

“And when I’m well again he’ll clap me in irons, Lizzie, I promise you that!”

“No, I won’t,” said Norrington smoothly. He was leaning against the doorjamb with his arms crossed over his chest, looking completely impassive. “I gave my word. And I wish you would stop addressing Mrs. Turner so informally.”

“Well, I wish you’d take a rusty anchor and shove it backwards up your –“ Elizabeth clapped a hand over his mouth before he could finish, but her eyes were dancing. Jack was capable of heavy flirting even with a severe fever. He puckered his lips and kissed her palm, making her giggle as she pulled away. When she settled her hands in her lap, he noted her rounded stomach for the first time. It was barely noticeable, but Jack made it his business to notice such things.

“Did I know about that?” he asked, giving the bump a significant glance.

She blushed prettily. “No, we hadn’t told you yet. Should be about five months before we have our own little pirate running around the shop.”

Jack raised an eyebrow at her in mock disapproval. “Darling, we are extraordinary creatures, but not even pirates are able to scamper about at birth.”

The commodore cleared his throat. Both parties looked over at him, annoyed. It was, however, his house.

Dropping his voice to just above a whisper, Jack said, “I don’t trust him.”

“I do,” she replied simply. “What are your other options at this point, Jack? He’d never have believed that we hadn’t seen you. He knows me far too well.”

“As well as I do?” asked Jack with a bit of a pout. With a smile, she leaned down to kiss his cheek.

“Please behave,” she whispered into his ear before sitting back up.

“Do I really have to stay here?” he demanded, loud enough for Norrington to hear. He thought he could detect an irritated grunt coming from the doorway.

Elizabeth smoothed his bedclothes fussily. “Yes, you do.”

“You could tell me what I’m sick with, at the very least.”

“Possibly malaria,” Norrington said.

Jack brightened visibly. “Serve me up some gin, then!”

Norrington sniffed. “I have purchased some ground Cinchona bark, which will do far better. It dissolves quite nicely in tea.”

It was the first inkling of a friendly gesture from the man, but Jack wanted nothing to do with it.

“Makes a tea tastes like bilgewater, I’ll wager,” he grumped.

“Jack,” Elizabeth admonished, “this is very serious. I want you to take whatever he gives you, and don’t waste your energy trying to escape or contact your crew – they’ve left you entirely in our care and you’ll return to them when I have personally deemed you well again.”

Jack looked to Norrington, finding this hard to believe.

“Of course,” he said, with an utterly sincere smile for Elizabeth. He did not meet Jack’s eyes. He was lying, and Jack would swear to it on pain of death.

Well. He wasn’t Captain Jack Sparrow for nothing. He would deal with that when the time came. He had not escaped the fearsome commodore twice to die by his hand now.

“You see?” Elizabeth said, poking him in the arm. “Will and I will visit you as frequently as we can. I’ve got to go now – I want you to rest, savvy?”

A tiny thread of panic rose within him at the thought of being alone with Norrington, but he kissed her hand graciously.

“Thank you for your care, Lizzie,” he murmured, letting his lashes drop down over his eyes. She was immune to his charms by now, but that didn’t mean she didn’t appreciate his constant attempts to use them on her.

“You’re welcome, Jack.”

“I’d like to be around when your babe is born,” he said almost shyly, hating that Norrington was present but wanting to tell her anyway.

Elizabeth’s answering smile was brilliant. “I’d like that too. Rest well.” She nodded to Norrington as she left.

And then it was just the two of them.

Norrington kept his position, arms crossed hostilely, at the doorway. Jack didn’t move either – but then, he had far less choice in the matter.

He opened his mouth, but Norrington cut him off before he could get a word out.

“Look,” said Norrington in a short, clipped tone that could not have been more different from that he used to address Elizabeth, “I don’t want you here any more than you want to be here. Frankly I think you’re a common filthy pirate, no matter if you've happened to do the Turners a fair deed or two, and the gallows are too good for you. But I’m doing a favor for the women who just left.”

“You still in love with her?” Jack wondered aloud. “I never believed you were to begin with.”

“That’s none of your business.” Norrington shifted his weight from foot to foot, a nervous gesture Jack had seen in many a sailor. “Regardless, you are not going to die under my roof. But if I find any of my possessions missing or misplaced, I won’t hesitate to turn you into the authorities immediately.”

“I won’t touch a thing.” Pity; there was nothing worth pilfering in this drab little room, but the commodore must have some riches in the building somewhere. He certainly could afford to keep

those brass buttons and fine leather boots polished to a sheen. Still, if it was between stealing a few knickknacks and a hanging, he supposed he could restrain himself.

Norrington hesitated a moment before he grudgingly asked, “How are you feeling? We gave you some tea a few hours ago, but if you’re doing badly another dose wouldn’t hurt...”

Jack chose to see this as an attack on his manhood. Such attacks had been made, many times, but coming from Norrington he was incensed where he would normally be dismissive. “I don’t need it,” he said defiantly.

“Fine,” said Norrington, still talking as though someone was waiting with scissors to chop off the ends of his words if he lingered on any too long. As he turned to go, Jack couldn’t help asking something.

“Am I to call you Commodore, or Norrington, or are you goin’ to give me a proper name? I don’t feel it’s fair, you knowing mine and me ignorant.”

Anger flashed in his eyes, the clearest display of emotion he’d shown since Jack had woken up. “I do not feel inclined to tell you my first name, Sparrow. And you may address me as ‘Commodore Norrington,’ not one or the other.”

“Then it is *Captain* Sparrow, savvy? And where are my effects? I should like to have them to hand.”

“I’m not going to arm you, Captain Sparrow. They are at the Turners’ and will be returned to you when you leave this residence.” He left, shutting the door behind him – not slamming it, of course, that would be far too unseemly. Jack heard tumblers fall into place; apparently it locked from the outside.

“That day cannot come soon enough,” he muttered, wiping his brow before sinking into an uncomfortable sleep.

In Which Jack Dreams and Restlessness Is Catching

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Norrington was dreaming rather pleasantly of London at Christmastide when he was jolted awake by a shout. For an instant he panicked, thinking of intruding pirates and flashing back to the events of a year ago, but gradually he remembered his guest. Of course he'd had the bad sense to put Jack in the spare bedroom next to his own, but it was the only one that locked.

Sighing, Norrington pulled the pillow over his head and tried to ignore the muffled grunts coming through the thin walls. Most of what Jack was saying was unintelligible, but he did catch a few words: "monkey," "prize," "island," "traitor." It was only when Jack began yelling about someone named Bill that Norrington flung off the covers and stalked into the next room.

Jack was tossing about violently on the bed. As Norrington drew close, he felt the heat emanating from his body. He tried to get a feel of Jack's forehead, but the fool struck out wildly and knocked his hand away.

"Not Bill!" Jack was crying. "Leave him be!"

"Sparrow," Norrington attempted in a normal voice. Then, a deal louder – thankful that he'd sent the servants home for the night – "SPARROW!" He ducked in under Jack's blindly flailing fists and took him by one shoulder, shaking him hard.

Jack's eyes opened wide on Norrington's face. He let his arms fall, panting. He looked awful; he was paler than he had been earlier in the day, and in the moonlight the bones in his face stood out starkly, evidence of the weight he'd already lost.

"Sick," he gasped, "need t' be sick –"

Quickly Norrington grabbed for the wooden basin he'd placed beside the bed for this very purpose. He pinched his nose with one hand while holding the basin steady with the other as Jack retched into it. Oh, that was absolutely disgusting. If he hadn't been so tired from staying up late to read nautical reports, he would have considered depositing Jack Sparrow on Will Turner's doorstep at that very moment.

Jack spat into the basin when he was done, then lay back down. His eyes were closed, but Norrington knew he wasn't sleeping.

Setting the basin distastefully aside – he would have to take it out to the privy himself – Norrington poured a glass of water from the pitcher on the nightstand and sprinkled a bit of powdered leaf into it. He offered it to Jack, who murmured a surprising thank you but was too weak to hold it. Norrington put a hand on his chin, noting how unearthly hot his skin was, and tried to tip the water back in his throat.

Jack scowled and attempted to fend him off, splashing them both in the process.

"Don't – need – help," he said.

"Yes, you do," Norrington retorted. "Either I'm going to force this down your throat, or you are going to accept my help and sip it slowly."

He glared but obeyed, gulping thirstily and making a face when he was done.

“Tastes terrible.”

Norrington cleaned the glass out with a handkerchief. “That’s how you know it will work.”

Despite himself, the corner of Jack’s mouth twitched. His eyelids drooped again. Norrington waited until he seemed asleep before getting up.

“‘Ey,” said Jack just as he’d reached the door.

Norrington turned to face his charge. “Yes?”

“What’s your name?”

Pursing his lips, Norrington left without replying. He could hear Jack chuckling himself to sleep as he sank back into his own bed.

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When Norrington checked on Jack the next morning, he was sleeping comfortably and his temperature was stable. Putting some water and the powder on the nightstand, he left for work, the thought of Jack nagging at the back of his head even when his mind was occupied by other matters. It made him uncomfortable to have a notorious pirate captain in his home, alone and unsupervised, no matter what condition that pirate was in. At noon, he decided to take his meal back at the house in order to check on his patient. He thought word would have reached the fort if Jack had burned the place to the ground, but one could never be sure.

His butler was rather surprised to see him. It was a well-known fact that the commodore usually worked through lunch. When he reached the room in which Jack was staying, he found Mrs. Perry, the housekeeper, staring at it with a perplexed expression on her face.

“Commodore Norrington,” she said, putting her hands to her cheeks, “it seems as though the door’s locked – I tried t' go in an' clean but the key's disappeared –”

Norrington winced as she was cut off by a distinct thumping sound coming from the room. Mrs. Perry looked to him for an explanation.

“That’s right, I did lock the door, and I've got the key,” he said quickly. “Delicate nautical experiment, you know, mustn’t have it disturbed.”

The thump sounded again and Mrs. Perry blinked at him. He cleared his throat in a half-hearted attempt to cover up the noise, but it did no good.

“Is – is 'at your experiment makin’ that noise, Commodore?” she asked uncertainly.

“Ah – yes, yes it is. **Angry puppy**.”

The woman who had kept his property in order for seven years stared at him as though he was a stranger. “A...puppy, sir?”

“Yes,” he said, feeling ridiculous – it had simply slipped out – but knowing it would look even more suspicious to take it back. “Top-secret Navy documents and...the puppy. It’s angry,” he added helpfully. “That must be why it’s making noise. I’ll just go in and...feed it.”

Mrs. Perry nodded slowly and backed away, still looking at him like he’d cracked. “Right, sir. I’ll
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have some cold chicken sandwiches waiting for you when you're done."

"Thank you," he said faintly. Humiliating himself in front of his servants: one more thing to add to the list of wrongs Jack Sparrow had done him. He had a feeling this list would grow exponentially until he could get the damned man out of his house.

Another thump came through the door and Norrington unlocked it, quickly shutting it again behind him.

Jack was at the window. It must had gotten stuck because he was laboring to pry it open. He had taken to smacking the frame in random spots with a large book. Norrington's eye was drawn to the nightstand; its drawers had been opened and their contents ransacked. He strode over to the window.

"Stop that at once!" He yanked the book out of Jack's hand. Jack swayed slightly more than usual, leaning against the wall. It was a good sign that he was feeling well enough to stand, but the toll his battle with the window had taken was apparent in his labored breathing and the sheen of sweat on his exposed skin.

"I just wanted some air," he said, studying his dirty fingernails in an attempt at nonchalance. It failed miserably, as his hands were shaking. A note of desperation crept into his voice. "I'm bound to go mad locked up in this rathole. I need to be outside –"

Norrington took him by the elbow and hauled him back to the bed. "What you need, Sparrow, is rest. You are not going to run mad – any more so, I should say – by remaining indoors."

"How would you know, Commodore?" Jack demanded harshly as Norrington knelt to clean up the mess he'd made. "You hole yourself up in your bloody office day in and day out, *you* don't need fresh air and open skies..."

"If you will please refrain from telling me what I do or do not need, Mr. Sparrow, I would like to remind you that you are a guest in my home –"

"Prisoner, more like."

"– and as such I expect you to respect my wishes and not alarm my servants."

Understanding passed over Jack's features. "Ah," he said, leaning back against the pillows, "your folk don't know I'm here, is that it?"

"Of course they don't!"

"Odd," said Jack. "That you can't trust your own people to keep a secret for you."

"I –" Norrington began sharply, but he stopped himself short. Telling his servants about his odd visitor had simply not occurred to him. "It's not that I don't trust them," he tried to explain. "It's that...well, caring for you is a burden, one they are not required to bear."

Jack shrugged. "All the same to me, mate. But it does seem that that's exactly what they're paid for, and you choosin' not to inform them of my illustrious presence has some deeper significance, the details of which are clearly not known even to yourself."

Norrington shut the nightstand drawers with a bang. "Has anyone ever told you that you talk a great deal too much, Mr. Sparrow?"

“All the time,” Jack sighed. “Though most of ‘em can’t match me the way you do.”

Norrington looked at him, wondering at his meaning, but he had turned onto his opposite side.

“Got anything for me to eat?” he asked, voice muffled by the pillow. “Feel as though I might actually be able to keep it down.”

“I have some broth Mrs. Turner sent over. I’ll go get it.”

“We can have a nice little luncheon together,” said Jack in a sing-song voice that did little to mask his bitterness.

As Norrington left the room, a gray cat poked her nose curiously around the corner.

“You don’t want to go in there,” he warned her, shutting and locking the door. “Trust me.”

After Norrington returned to work, he found it extremely difficult to concentrate. He twiddled his thumbs; he spent ten minutes trying to get through a single paragraph; he kept staring out the window at the blue Caribbean sea far beyond.

“Gillette,” he called.

The lieutenant was quick to answer. “Sir?”

“I’ll be a moment.” Norrington got up and spared one more glance for the sea. “I’m going to take the air.”

Chapter End Notes

Bolded quote filched from "Buffy the Vampire Slayer."

In Which Jack Plots In the Nude

“It has come to my attention that I am very dirty.”

Norrington did not look up from the map he was scrutinizing. “Please leave my study, Mr. Sparrow.”

Jack, blanket wrapped around his shoulders, ran a finger along a bookshelf. It was late, past midnight, and yet here Norrington was, wide awake and too bloody active. Jack had heard him tossing restlessly in the room next door, before he’d gotten up and padded quietly down the hall in his bare feet. After a quarter of an hour of trying to get to sleep himself, Jack had given up and followed.

“What are you doing awake, anyhow?” Norrington wanted to know. He glanced up at Jack, who was struck by how much younger he looked, out of uniform and out of that ridiculous white wig. In its natural state his hair was a dark, rich brown, long enough to hold a tendency to fall forward over his brow - he must have a devil of a time keeping it under that queue. He was wearing only a plain white nightshirt and a forest-green dressing gown that suited his eyes in a manner he probably wasn't even aware of.

“How old are you?” Jack asked curiously instead of answering the question.

Norrington’s cheeks flushed a light pink. “I don’t see how that information is pertinent to your recovery.”

Jack shrugged it off. “Back to my original purpose,” he said, propping himself against the desk. Norrington rolled his eyes and scooted his chair a few inches back. “I’m filthy, mate.”

“I quite agree,” said Norrington crisply. “What do you propose I do about it?”

“Well,” said Jack, “I’ve smelt you and you seem to clean yourself regularly.” Norrington looked perturbed at the thought that Jack had noticed how he smelled. “So I can only assume that you bathe,” Jack continued, “and therefore you must be in possession of a tub, and I would very much like to use it.”

“You want to take a bath,” said Norrington, apparently seeking confirmation though his voice was perfectly flat.

He nodded and leaned forward on purpose, hoping that Norrington might catch a whiff of him – he was indeed quite dirty, with all the fever-induced perspiration, and his body’s odor was not pleasant by any stretch of the imagination. From the pinched look that suddenly came over Norrington’s face, he suspected it had worked.

“A very short bath,” Norrington warned. “You must get out before the water cools, as I can only imagine what sort of turn your health would take after a cold soak.”

Jack grinned fetchingly at him. It had the same effect it always did: it put a distressed little frown on his lips. Jack never got tired of making him do that – it was a cheap thrill, but an infinitely satisfying one. “I follow your orders, Commodore.” He saluted and Norrington sighed in long-suffering irritation.

Some time later, Jack was lounging in a sizeable copper tub. The pleasure of feeling the layers of sweat and grime soak away was nothing short of divine. A fine lass and a bottle of strong rum

would be his ideal, but he was willing to take his pleasures where he could get them.

Trailing a hand in the now-dirty bathwater, Jack thought idly about his current situation. He had been six weeks away from the sea, and his longing for it was almost too painful to contemplate. It was a subtle distinction in his blood, like a good voice singing just slightly off-key. And he hated few things as he hated being helpless against the ravages of his illness, which struck in varying degrees so that sometimes he felt ready to take on the entire royal Navy and yet would be hunched over a basin ten minutes later, throwing his guts up. Still, Elizabeth and Will came to see him frequently, and he and Norrington had settled into a kind of routine.

Norrington – now there was a subject worthy of bathtime meditation. It was so easy to upset the delicate balance of his little world. Jack had a great disdain for routine, while men like Norrington lived by it. He had no friends more intimate than the Turners and he had more pride than he knew what to do with. Embarrassing him was a simple matter, and yet he was difficult to charm – and Jack had tried his damnedest to do so. He still wasn't entirely certain that Norrington wasn't planning on hanging him, though he seemed a genuinely good man. He figured that even the vaguest overtures of friendship might put a stop to that plan.

Of course, there was also the little factor of attraction.

Jack would admit to himself, if to no one else, that he had wanted Norrington even before all of this business. The man was handsome, to be sure, and he was comprised of a curious juxtaposition of stiff formality and honest vulnerability. He tried hard to be properly distant and detached, but Jack had never seen eyes so frank and open, so prone to betraying whatever he was feeling. And his mouth held a certain sensitivity that Jack found quite promising – it was almost akin to the soft set of Will's mouth.

He allowed himself a brief thought about Will for a moment before dismissing it. Even if Elizabeth had not been in the way, the memory of the boy's father was.

What, on the other hand, was in the way of his seducing Norrington?

The commodore's dislike of him, of course, though there were brief moments when it seemed to lessen. The idea of him not being the sort to sleep with other men did not even occur to Jack as a potential barrier. He had lured many into his bed who had never been in such a situation before.

If it did nothing else, it would give him another avenue of power, merely because he had a great deal of experience and Norrington clearly had little to none. And an affair would definitely help to alleviate the dreariness of his life in Port Royal – the dreariness of *Norrington's* life, when it came right down to it.

Elizabeth would kill him if she knew what he was plotting. She genuinely liked the man, even if she wasn't willing to marry him. Then again, he doubted Norrington would ever be in a mood to tell her, so that wasn't much of a deterrent.

His mind wandered off in thoughts of his planned seduction. Norrington would be standing before him, perhaps tipsy on some mysteriously procured liquor, and his lips would part slowly as Jack kissed him. He might taste of peppermint or sugarcane – something sweet, but not overly so, and heavy. Jack would undress him slowly and deliberately, slipping his hands inside the cumbersome officers' coat, pulling his stiff white shirt open, while those wide green eyes fluttered closed and Norrington moaned into Jack's mouth...

He wasn't certain at what precise moment in the fantasy he fell asleep, but he had definitely not reached its inevitable conclusion when shouting and pounding on the door awakened him.

The water had turned to ice around him and it seemed to be inside him too, running through his veins. He tasted blood as violent shivers caused his teeth to knock together with his tongue between them.

There was silence on the other side of the door, then a great solid thump before it flew open. Norrington landed hard on his hands and knees.

“You locked yourself in, you idiot!” he panted.

Jack was too wary of biting his tongue again if he tried to answer. His efforts to move succeeded only in one hand reaching out of the tub.

Norrington got to his feet and grabbed Jack by the shoulders. His face was tight with worry and a touch of fear.

“You must get out, you’ve been in there for nearly an hour – ”

“C-can’t move,” Jack stammered, clenching all the muscles in his body in an attempt to still their shaking. It didn’t work.

He found himself lifted under the arms and hauled upright. When he stumbled they both nearly took a fall, but Norrington managed to keep his balance. Jack pressed his face into Norrington’s neck, aware that he was unable to stand under his own power and not caring. Norrington’s skin smelled of talcum powder and ink.

The air hit Jack’s body with the force of gale winds. He hadn’t been this cold since he was a boy, huddled in front of the stove in January and dreaming of warm tropical climates...

Without a word Norrington lifted him carefully, one arm going under Jack’s knees while the other clasped firmly about his chest. Jack was mildly amused at the tableau they formed: Norrington ever the stalwart hero, carrying Jack like he was a damsel in distress – if such damsels were blessed with certain facets of male anatomy and went about naked as the day they were born, and soaking wet besides. It would have been the perfect time to put his plan into action, had he not been concentrating on just staying conscious. He gave up the struggle only when Norrington deposited him in bed, tucking the blankets securely around him.

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The very next thing Jack was conscious of was a damp cloth being pressed to his brow. Its first touch was cool, but it warmed to his skin within seconds, and he knew that things were very bad indeed.

He was no longer shivering like a drowned cat. His head was clear but his muscles ached, and his fever was a hurt in and of itself. It felt like a tangible thing inside his head, searching out the still-sane parts of his mind and burning them away. He kept his eyes closed as he tried to fight it.

The cloth left his skin and Norrington’s fingers pressed under his jaw, checking his pulse. They were toughened fingers on hands that had known hard work, probably hard sailing. Jack had felt that when Norrington had gripped his hand the day Elizabeth nearly drowned. He appreciated those hands on his body, even in such a cursory manner as this.

“Sparrow?” said Norrington. He sounded anxious. After a pause during which Jack failed to respond, he tried again, the name coming surprisingly softly: “Jack?”

At this Jack opened his eyes. The light in the room was dim, which was good. Norrington was
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peering down at him, looking pale and frightened.

Jack touched his tongue to his lips; they were cracked and dry, but he wanted no water. He could tell his stomach would reject even that.

“Is it – how do you feel?”

Jack stared straight up at the ceiling. Norrington’s eyes were full of pity and Jack wanted none of it, but neither did he have the strength to scandalize him out of it, or to make him angry enough to forget it.

“Everything...hurts,” he whispered, astonished at his own admittance. It seemed illness loosened his tongue better than any drink might have.

Norrington reached out as if to take Jack’s hand, but he reconsidered and snatched it back to his lap. “Your fever’s so dangerously high,” he said, the customary calm of his well-bred voice totally gone. “If I could only send for a surgeon –”

“No,” said Jack. His teeth clenched as his left thigh spasmed; he bit his tongue once again and focused on that pain to the deficiency of the others. Norrington caught his faint whimper, however, and this time he did fold Jack’s hand in his own.

“Tell me what I can do,” Norrington said desperately. “I’ve given you medicine, but...”

Jack shifted his gaze to Norrington’s frantic face. He knew this offer was only made because Norrington hated to lose control of anything, but he did not want to face the demons in his head alone, not when he was helpless like this. He would have given anything to have Bill at his side, or Will, or Elizabeth. Norrington would have to substitute, inferior substitute though he would be.

“Talk to me.”

He didn’t hesitate before replying. “What shall I say?”

Jack closed his eyes again, seeing colors dance and swirl like the northern lights against his lids. “Anything. Just talk.”

“I – I have a cat,” said Norrington haltingly. “Did you know that? Probably you didn’t...well, anyway, I have a cat. Her name is Annabelle. She’s fat and gray, and she hasn’t caught a single mouse in the past five years. I brought her with me from England. My officers made light of me behind my back, but I wasn’t going to leave her. She likes anchovies and cheese...Sparr – Jack? Are you...”

“I’m awake,” Jack murmured. “Keep babbling.”

“I do not babble. Do you keep cats on your ship? I think it’s a benefit to people to keep a pet. Perhaps it’s silly to dote on an old cat, but I haven’t got much else to dote on, have I? Don’t answer that.”

Somewhere between the realms of sleep and awake, Jack smiled. Norrington kept talking, and he kept his light grip on Jack’s hand, until Jack’s temperature dropped a few degrees.

He started to pull away, but Jack’s fingers tightened around his.

“Your name, good Commodore,” said Jack without opening his eyes.

Norrington shifted in his chair, but he stayed.

“It’s Gabriel,” he replied in a quiet voice.

The faint trace of a smirk appeared on Jack’s lips. “Gabriel. Pretty,” he mumbled, only half-aware of what he was saying. “Strength of God, angels and baby Jesus and whatnot.”

“No, I’m only me,” he heard Norrington protest faintly, before he fell off the edge of sleep and heard nothing more.

In Which Jack Tells a Story and Charms a Cat

Norrington woke from the sunlight pouring in the window and onto his closed eyelids. He rolled his shoulders, feeling them crack painfully; he'd fallen asleep in the chair by Jack's bed and it was not exactly the most comfortable way to pass the night.

Jack twitched and grunted, looking for all the world like his uncle's dog dreaming about chasing rabbits as he curled his toes – *bare* toes. Goodness. He was naked and he'd kicked most of the blankets away, leaving just a twist of sheet across his hips. Norrington felt heat spread across his face as his eyes took stock of that wiry body, thinner than it should have been and slightly jaundiced under the deep tan, but still appealing –

He gripped the arms of his chair in sudden panic. What on earth was he thinking? Sparrow's body was *not* appealing, healthy or otherwise, nude or clothed. If he had kept such a close watch on the man for the past night, it was only for fear that his fever would rise again. If he had held Sparrow perhaps a bit too tightly on the way to the room, it was only in an effort to warm him and put a stop to his shivering.

Nothing more, he thought fiercely as he tugged a quilt over Jack, who didn't stir

Catching sight of the sun's position in the sky, he swore softly and hurried to his own room to dress. When he stumbled through the front doors of the fort, muttering apologies, he met only an astonished maid mopping the floor. She informed him that it was Sunday and as such, most of the officers were not due in that morning – including Norrington himself. After apologizing for startling her and tracking mud in, he went back to his horse and set off for home.

So it seemed he wasn't going to be able to avoid home, and therefore Jack, after all. Of course he might have stayed; there was always paperwork to do. But he rather disliked the fort when it was empty. It was rumored to be haunted, and though Norrington had once scoffed at sailors' superstitions, his opinion on such matters had quite naturally changed.

As he made his way home, he began to cheer up. He wouldn't actually have to be around Sparrow, after all. No doubt he would sleep all day after his rather trying ordeal. Norrington could retreat to his study, his favorite room in the house, and be at peace from both overeager underlings and feverish pirate captains.

It seemed, however, that fate had anticipated his plans and found them wanting, for when he pushed the study door open with a grateful sigh, he found Jack Sparrow stretched out on the blue velvet chaise lounge next to the window.

Norrington stared open-mouthed for a moment as Jack grinned and waved at him. He'd dragged in half the contents of his bed, cloaking himself in blankets, and he was surrounded by stacks of Norrington's books.

"*What* are you..." Norrington began helplessly.

Jack thumbed through the book in his lap – a collection of French poetry, unless Norrington was mistaken. "It's terrible boring being shut up in that room all day, Gabriel my good man."

"I am not your good anything," Norrington exclaimed indignantly, "and I don't want you to use that name, and look at the mess you've made!" He knelt and began to gather the leather volumes in his arms.

“Oh, it’s not as bad as all that,” Jack muttered, sticking his tongue out at Norrington as his prizes were taken away. He clutched at the book in his arms when Norrington tried to reclaim it. “I’ve not finished with this one yet!”

With a weary sigh, Norrington let himself slide down into the small chintz sofa opposite the chaise. His day had been spoiled beyond repair and he might as well accept it. “What is it?”

Jack flipped the book around to show him a painting of a bare-breasted mermaid.

“I didn’t even remember I still had that,” said Norrington with the faint hint of a smile, recognizing the dusty book of fairy tales with its bright illustrations. “My aunt Rose bought it for me when I was small.”

Studying the picture critically, Jack frowned. “Isn’t the least bit accurate.”

“And I suppose you’ve seen a mermaid?” Norrington asked, one eyebrow raised.

“Seen? Almost married one, mate,” said Jack brightly.

“Really.” His voice dripped sarcasm, but his interest was piqued anyway, and he knew Jack could tell.

Jack nodded emphatically. Letting the book fall into his lap, he leaned forward to begin his story. “See, I was a lad of sixteen and I was sailin’ with the crew of a man named Roberts. We were on our way from the Carolinas to Barbados when we came across a spit of land that glimmered in the sun. Shouldn’t have been there – not on any map we could find – and yet there it is. I was curious about it, so I suggest we stop and have a look around. Roberts says boo to that plan and, more, decides he isn’t pleased with one o’ his crew asking so many questions.”

“I can well imagine how insufferable you must have been as a boy under anybody’s command, much less that of a pirate,” Norrington remarked dryly.

Jack smirked. “No, Commodore, you really cannot. Anyway, they set me ashore with naught but my clothes, a pistol – not the one I’ve got now, mind – and a few hunks of mealy bread.”

“I take it this was the first time you were marooned?”

“It was, and I wasn’t too worried, oddly enough. S’ppose it was only from bein’ young and stupid.” He smiled again and Norrington wondered at how easily it came, as if they were two old friends having tea over a familiar tall tale. If he’d had such an infectious expression, he didn’t think he would be so generous with it.

“So I wandered around for a bit,” Jack continued, “and headed back down to the beach for a swim to take my mind off things. I was splashing about when I heard a sort of low gigglin’ nearby. It was this mermaid, tucked behind a clump of rock and watching me. She didn’t look a thing like the pictures – oh, she was formed like a woman up top, certainly, but her hair was like tough seaweed, an’ her eyes were cold, fishy eyes that didn’t blink too often. Her skin was that milky blue a body gets when it’s just starting to rot in the water, and she stank like spilled guts.”

“And this is the creature you almost married?”

“Haven’t mentioned the teeth yet, have I?” He bared his own teeth, sparked with gold, for effect. Norrington wrinkled his nose. “Teeth like a shark, up and down, and I’m not too sure I didn’t see a coupla shreds of flesh stuck on ‘em. She spoke a good sort of English, albeit with a funny squeaky accent, an’ she told me in no uncertain terms that she’d taken a shine to me. Well, now – and not

that I could blame her, since I was as fit a lad as I am a man – I tried to beg off, in the most diplomatic way possible. She'd have none of that, thank you, and there were those wicked teeth to consider..."

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Fifteen minutes later Norrington was blinking at Jack's conclusion to his tale.

"And that's how it happened." Jack flopped himself back in his makeshift nest, looking quite satisfied with his own performance.

"But how did the dwarf get to the forest in the first place?"

With an indulgent sigh and a hand rolling on a wrist, Jack patiently told him, "That wasn't the point of the story."

Norrington had no idea how Jack had managed to hold his attention for such a ridiculous and meandering tale. It was some combination of the way his voice rose and fell, a spell woven by his never-still hands and his dancing dark eyes.

"I don't know why I even bother," he muttered. Jack chuckled.

"You'll get no answers from me, mate," he said good-naturedly. Before Norrington could ask the pressing question of whether Jack actually expected to him to believe this story of bloodthirsty, lustful mermaids, the other man heaved a couple of deep coughs before draining the glass of water on the side table.

The memory of how very sick he'd been the night before hit Norrington just then. "How are you feeling, Captain Sparrow?"

Jack tapped his fingertips idly against the glass in his hand. "Oh, not bad, considering. It's just..." He winced and set the glass aside, rubbing at his left shoulder. "Me neck's rather achy, is all, and right back between my shoulders." Twisting one arm around, he set his face in a grimace of pain as he tried to work out whatever kinks were paining his back.

"You'll never reach," said Norrington, unfolding himself from his sofa to lean over the arm of Jack's chaise. "Here, let me." Jack pulled the unkempt fall of hair aside to allow access to his neck, where Norrington lay both hands, flat-palmed, and started to knead gently.

"My aunt got terrible rheumatism in the winter," he explained. "I used to rub the ache out of her bones."

"Same one gave you the book?" He nodded, pressing his thumbs into the knots on either side of Jack's spinal cord. Jack let out a hiss at the relief from tension, half-pain and half-pleasure. "Must've been your favorite aunt, for you to go to so much trouble."

"Actually we never got on. She was in her seventies, she despised all little boys, and she smelled like boiled cabbage."

Jack's shoulders lifted under his hands in quiet laughter. "Were you so well-behaved even then?"

Norrington shrugged. "She was my father's elder sister and she more or less raised him, after my grandmother died. Everyone in our family did what she said. Stay still," he ordered, as Jack wriggled into the touch.
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“Sorry,” said Jack, sounding anything but. “Feels good, no doubt due to skill garnered from all that practice. 'Least now I know you’re good for something else besides snapping to.”

“And what is that supposed to mean?” He slipped the shirt farther down Jack’s shoulders and balked at the long, thin scars etched across the skin of his back.

“Nothing,” said Jack innocently. He hunched his shoulders impatiently, but when he spoke again, his voice was quiet. “You must’ve seen ‘em. Last night, and before that – I imagine you’ve shown a man or two the lash.”

His fingertips curled uncertainly above the pale lines, witnesses to where the flesh had once been split and bloodied. He supposed he had seen them last night, but hadn’t noticed. He’d been far too busy trying not to focus on Jack’s body, a theme on which his thoughts had been centered during the bath. It had been his fault, after all – listening to Jack splash with only a thin wall separating them, losing track of time as he imagined those darkly tanned hands sliding across a lean belly, down his thighs, before reaching out to caress Norrington’s own bare skin...

As the color rushed to his face, he drew his hands away from Jack as though he’d been burned. Jack twisted around, but before he caught the look in Norrington’s eyes, a questioning meow echoed from the doorway.

Thank you, thank you, thought Norrington fervently as he went to crack the door open. Annabelle stared at him, clearly daring him to insult her queenly bulk any further, before he relented and opened it wider. She sauntered in with her tail flicking casually. If the damned cat had not interrupted...

He’d come very close, leaning over a relaxed and sprawling Jack, to losing control. Close to losing something else, as well, though he wasn’t sure what – dignity? Professional distance? Years of excuses and denial? His soul?

Jack was looking at him with hard, searching eyes. For an instant Norrington saw the killer as well as the charmer in him – the man who’d held a gun to Elizabeth’s temple reconciled with the man constantly drifting just a bit too close into everyone’s personal space.

Then the flash of – *something* – behind his eyes was gone and he was all solicitation once again.

“And this must be the lady of the house,” he said with a dramatic flourish, dropping his gaze to Annabelle, who stalked over to him with a wary sidestep.

“I’d be careful, she doesn’t take well to strangers –” Norrington warned. He fell silent as Annabelle leapt up onto the chaise.

“Cats tend to like me,” said Jack smugly as Annabelle proceeded to knead his lap into a more comfortable cushion. “Easy with the claws, love.” The cat settled down and conjured up a rusty purr as she looked at Norrington. He could almost swear that her amber eyes were saying ‘See? It’s not such a bad place to be.’

Norrington backed up towards the door in alarm. He certainly did not want to curl up in Jack Sparrow’s lap. And his cat was a dear pet, but nothing more. The fact that she was strangely taken with his house guest meant absolutely nothing.

Jack stroked Annabelle’s ears. “No wonder you’ve never gotten married,” he remarked. “Jealous, this one is.”

“Haven’t you got a sweetheart in some filthy port who could take you in?” Norrington snapped.

He shook his head and ran a hand down Annabelle's back as she shuddered with contentment. "I need no mistress but the sea, Commodore – and the *Pearl*, naturally." His mood turned palpably as he looked out the window and toyed with the end of Annabelle's tail, earning himself a swipe which he ignored. "I daresay she misses me now as much as this fine gentlewoman misses you when you're off at sea."

"You're so devoted to that ship," said Norrington, meaning to cut but finding his voice lacking any force. "What lover could ever compete?" He was surprised to hear his own bold words, not entirely sure what had prompted them -- that distant loss in Jack's eyes, perhaps.

"Whoever's willing to try," said Jack, his voice dropping low and his mouth quirking into a half-grin as his melancholy burned off like morning fog.

Norrington decided suddenly that they were not, in fact, having this conversation. With a curt nod, he ducked through the door and shut it behind him.

In Which Norrington Gets Nekkid, Kind Of

“It’s such a miserably hot day.” Norrington flopped down into the sofa across from Jack, who glanced up from the map of the west African coast he was mentally critiquing. Sweat was pouring down Norrington's face and there was color enough in his cheeks that Jack briefly wondered if he was getting sick as well. Their eyes met and Norrington shook his head slightly.

“I feel fine,” he said in answer to Jack’s unspoken question. “I just hate this wretched climate.” He rubbed a palm across his forehead, looking down at it with a grimace of distaste.

Shrugging, Jack propped his elbows on his knees as he leaned forward. “Must be that pure English blood of yours.”

“God, I’d give anything for a proper winter,” Norrington groaned. “Rain and gray clouds and a bit of snow...”

Jack shuddered. Norrington, having grown up in a fine house with sufficient socks and coats and mufflers, was allowed the luxury of enjoying cold weather that somebody of Jack's own parentage was denied. “Can’t say as I agree with you, mate. Weather is one thing I was very glad to leave behind. Wouldn’t object to a nice cool sea breeze, o’ course...” He cast a hopeful glance at Norrington, who twitched an irritated eyebrow at him. Jack had been after him for days for a quick nip down to the docks, under the cover of night or a disguise, just to dip a toe in. Norrington was not exactly in favor of the idea.

“Still,” he said, letting his voice drop low and looking up from under his eyelashes, “heat agrees with me, and I’ve rarely had a man argue ‘bout that.”

He paused expectantly, waiting for a blush and a stammer. The comment had been on the more blatant side of his attempts at seduction, something not even this man could ignore.

But ignoring him was exactly what Norrington was doing, as he fiddled with the cuff on his sleeve and plucked at a curl of his wig, distracted by his own discomfort. And that – that would certainly not do.

“Commodore, if I may offer you some friendly advice?” Norrington glanced at him, surprised and no small bit wary – Jack had been a bit of a hellion lately, and he had no trouble admitting it to himself. Poking and prodding at Norrington's stiff sensibilities, trying to determine what would open him up and what would get Jack shut out completely. But for this tack he needed subtlety and charm, at least one of which qualities he was never lacking.

He waved a hand vaguely at Norrington’s torso. “Naturally you’re overheated – look at what you’re wearing!”

Norrington glanced down at himself doubtfully. “There’s nothing unusual about my clothing.”

“Aye, but look how much there is of it. Yards of wool and linen, all heavy and encumbering. And that wig – however d’you manage to even draw a decent breath with that gull’s nest atop your head?”

Well, perhaps ‘charm’ wasn’t the proper term for it. More like charm in reverse – but if it earned him results, he wasn’t going to discount it.

Norrington’s chin had lifted defiantly and he was glaring at Jack, every bit the offended peacock.

And oh, how Jack enjoyed ruffling his many feathers.

“I dress according to my station,” he said stiffly. “As you do to yours,” he added with a bit of a smirk, indicating Jack’s rather bedraggled clothing with a crisp nod.

At any other time Jack might have been offended, but that would not serve his purpose. “My rags’re a good deal cooler than your uniform, I’d wager.” The grudging hint of agreement creeping into Norrington’s eyes emboldened him and he tried a different angle. “‘Sides, who’s here to see you in all the glory of your station? Trying to impress old Captain Jack, are we?”

Norrington’s face immediately tightened, that little crease appearing between his brows, and Jack knew he’d won. “Hardly, *Captain*.”

He stifled a grin of triumph as Norrington, eyes doggedly fixed on him, reached up to tug the powdered wig off. His hair tumbled into his eyes as he raked his fingers through it, clearing it of the pomade used to keep it neat. He struggled out of the blue jacket, which Jack really rather liked, with its bright buttons and golden flash of braid. It might be in his interest to try the thing on one day, perhaps secure one for himself. He’d never gone in for the aristocratic airs some pirates tried to put on in their rich dress, but that coat of Norrington’s was nearly as fine as the man himself.

Damned fine, Jack had to amend, watching Norrington first untie, then unwind his spotless white cravat and toss it over the back of the sofa. The things that could be done with that long, long stretch of cloth, softer and more forgiving than rope or shackles...

He had to keep from letting his eyes glaze over, or his tongue run out over his lips, or some other overt sign that would give away the game before he got a better glimpse of that skin, glistening faintly in the waning afternoon light.

Norrington tugged at his collar, loosening it. Jack waited, but there he stopped.

Half-banking on Norrington’s sense of fair play and even stakes, half-sure that he’d ruin the whole show, Jack couldn’t stop himself from prompting in an idle tone, “Not the shirt as well? It sticks to you, I've noticed, and you’d be that much cooler.” The look on Norrington’s face was just short of suspicion, so he flashed gold and teeth in an attempt to disarm him. “It isn’t as though you’ve not seen me in such a state, and more besides.”

For a moment he thought he had indeed taken it too far. As Norrington’s wary eyes searched his own, he tried to hide his less-than-honorable intentions behind a veneer of laconic amusement and found it more difficult than he’d imagined. Whatever degree of success he managed to reach, it soon slipped his mind as a quick, hard decision was made in that piercing green gaze. Norrington looked down, following the path of his own hands as he slowly pulled his shirt up. And Jack found himself not paying the slightest attention to the newly-bared flesh, instead watching Norrington’s fingers, which were trembling slightly.

Was that a sign – did he know? Jack was convinced that he had to know on some level, that the dark glances and fleeting little touches were registering in a way he would not yet acknowledge. But his hands, even as Jack noted the faint tremors, stilled, steadied, peeled the dampened shirt from his shoulders.

Jack took the quickest of looks before he could be accused of staring – skin fair like he’d expected, protected by all that rich fabric whenever the sun might chance to fall upon it. Yet even expecting it did not prepare him for the reality of all that pale flesh, nearly glowing against the deep wine-colored silk of the sofa on which Norrington sat. Unblemished except for a scar extending from his ribs around his right side – Jack wondered if that skin could possibly be as soft as it looked, against

hands and lips, if it would redden under a gently sucking mouth – he'd bet gold that those neatly-muscled shoulders would freckle if they caught a few rays...

It was a sheer effort of will to tear his hungry eyes away from the body he'd spent the past few weeks picturing unclothed. He'd been able to contemplate ravishing the good Commodore with a certain level of detachment, thinking more of the beneficial results than the act itself. And his illness, much as he hated to admit it, had put something of a damper on his libidinous nature.

That did not seem to be a problem any longer.

He dragged a pillow onto his lap and began to count silently, eyes fixed on the ceiling for as long as he could keep them there.

When he could look at Norrington again without being overcome by the need to leap at him, he found him flexing his arms with a surprised, relaxed look on his face, and that certainly wasn't helping matters any.

"I do feel much better," said Norrington cheerfully.

Jack offered a wan half-smile in return, hating him briefly for being that handsome and that unaware of it. People should not be awarded bodies like Norrington's when they had no idea how to use them.

Norrington shifted into a more comfortable sprawl on the sofa, causing the trim muscles of his stomach to do interesting things that made hatred the furthest option from Jack's mind.

To his relief, a welcome distraction came in the form of Annabelle, trotting in with a hunk of something gray and ratty gripped between her teeth.

A very real smile lit Norrington's face. "And the lady returns from the hunt." He bent forward until he was on the ground, on his knees and one hand as he wrestled the cat's prize away with the other.

Jack swallowed hard. Those Navy-issue breeches were certainly a tight fit. He'd never seen a fine back view of Norrington, the jacket being always in the way, but here he was, and here he kept Jack's attention despite the danger of being caught looking.

The strange burbling sound he made in his throat caused Norrington to look over his shoulder – peering back at him with his rear in the air like that...

Jack thought that he deserved a medal, a royal pardon, hell, sainthood for keeping his head when faced with such a sight.

"What was that?" Norrington was saying.

Clearing his throat, Jack said, "That catch of hers, there, what might that be?"

He bit his lip and looked down, the tint of a blush to his perfect skin. Jack wondered desperately if some power on this earth wanted him dead.

"An old wig of mine," said Norrington sheepishly. "I gave it to her to play with ages ago. I thought it might stop the parade of dead mice, rats, and birds that kept being marched into my bedroom."

"Clearly they were gifts. You should be flattered." And he could not keep the low shiver of desire out of his voice, could not stop his eyes from burning. There was no turning back now –

consummation of whatever he thought he could feel between them was imminent.

Jack discovered that he didn't mind that at all. He'd just keep looking at Norrington like this, offering him whatever pleasures he might dream up and many he'd probably never heard of.

Norrington was going to be *his*.

Any minute now.

Norrington blinked at him and sat back on his heels. "Are you feeling unwell today, Sparrow? You're looking a bit flushed."

He closed his eyes and covered them with his palm. "Fine," he mumbled. "I am absolutely, positively, completely and without doubt bloody *fine*."

"Well...all right," said Norrington dubiously. "I'll just go get you some soup, if you feel up to it."

Up to it.

Bollocks.

Jack nodded without looking at him. He waited until he heard the door click shut before he opened his eyes again.

"This is not going according to plan," he said to the cat. She spared him a cursory glance before deciding that her newly regained prey was far more interesting. Jack privately agreed. He'd become nothing more than a house pet, harmless and purring, a – a *kept* pirate.

Plans, he knew from vast experience, could be altered, at the last gasp if need be. Claws could be sharpened.

It was astonishingly simple, once he thought about it: there was only one thing that could be done with a man like Norrington. As he watched Annabelle stalking her bedraggled old wig across the rug, he put the perfect words to the concept.

He would have to pounce.

In Which Jack Pounces

Chapter Notes

> Warning: this chapter contains some dubcon as well as oblique references to child abuse.

Norrington was awakened from a thankfully dreamless sleep by the sound of thrashing limbs. He winced and stretched, realizing that he'd fallen asleep in the chair beside Jack's bed rather than his own clean, comfortable bed. Nothing he wasn't used to – he often fell asleep at his desk, and the armchair was a deal more comfortable.

Jack groaned and vaulted onto his left side, facing Norrington. In the moonlight coming through the open window, his eyes appeared sunken in his face. He looked up at Norrington in a haze of fever, shivering violently.

Damn. He had seemed to be much better these past few days, but now he was twisting around beneath the sheets in a way that was painful to watch. Norrington got up and leaned forward, brushing a lock of dark, matted hair away from Jack's brow. His skin was hot to the touch, though not as hot as it had been when he'd first arrived.

"What is it, Sparrow?"

"Cold," Jack replied, his voice rising in a whine, "so cold, so cold...hate the cold..."

Norrington sighed and rearranged the blankets. The other man tossed around again until his back was to Norrington, knees drawn up to his chest until he was a small shaking ball, mumbling piteously about the cold.

At this point Norrington couldn't take it any longer. He drew the covers aside. Jack didn't react as Norrington slid in beside him and took him in steady arms.

"There now," he whispered in an attempt to soothe Jack's whimpering, drawing the smaller man back against his chest, "is that better?" It was stiflingly hot, but Norrington ignored his own discomfort, vigorously rubbing his hand up and down Jack's arm. The sooner he could get Jack warmed, the sooner he could get out of this bed and away from temptation.

"Aye," Jack agreed sleepily. His body began to relax, muscles unclenching as he let his legs fall back alongside Norrington's. "Warm." He turned to face his makeshift bed warmer, shifting so that he was lying comfortably in the circle of Norrington's arms, pressing his face into Norrington's neck. He yawned, pink gums showing. Norrington, feeling decidedly sleepy himself from the close warmth, stroked his hands idly down Jack's back. Strange – his body was cool, not nearly as heated as his face.

"Warm," Jack repeated softly, letting his fingers come to rest on Norrington's hip. It was just then that Norrington realized Jack had thrown a leg over him, and it was as this thought was exploding in his brain that Jack kissed him.

For a moment all Norrington felt was shock. Then he was aware of Jack's tongue pushing his lips

apart, one arm going round his waist while the other gripped the back of his head. The southbound hand found its way to his backside and squeezed gently, making Norrington start, but other than that he could not move.

Finally notions of protest began to make their way into his paralyzed brain; he pushed against Jack's body, but this only caused Jack to hold on tighter, bucking his hips as his nails dug into Norrington's flesh. And within that abbreviated thrust the extent of Jack's desire was brought to Norrington's knowledge, striking him dumb once again, this time with wonder at how much his body welcomed the sensation. Jack moved against him again, his erection pressing between Norrington's legs in a nature of pleasure that Norrington had left behind long ago. Half-memories swam to the surface of his thoughts, schoolboy moments of stolen bliss he had spent years repressing. With them came the memories of discovery and punishment, provoking an aversion strong enough that he tried to picture Jack as a woman. He was nearly slight enough, but in all the places where their bodies touched he knew better: Jack's cock against his own, the hard, flat planes of his chest, his mustache scraping against Norrington's cheek as Jack plundered his mouth...

Norrington knew that he had the upper hand in this situation. It would take the smallest of efforts to shove him over, off the bed if he so chose. Instead he took notice of Jack's mouth on his own. Experimentally he pressed his tongue against Jack's; with a small murmur of encouragement Jack lent him courage, and he began to explore. He came into contact with Jack's gold and silver teeth, discovering that they were the source of the exotic tang he detected. It was a taste that he felt should have been unpleasant, but in reality was far from it. He ran his hands under Jack's nightshirt and up, feeling the network of scars he had so far only witnessed. Norrington touched them lightly, irrationally fearing that he would cause pain. Sight had not prepared him for the way the weathered skin of the pirate's back puckered into little ridges and crevasses, balanced by the craters of the gunshot wounds in the front – a whole landscape under his fingertips, as warm as if the Caribbean sun had been beating down upon it.

Jack's lips left Norrington's own to trace his jawline back to his ear, which received a light nip. Norrington heard a sharp cry but did not register it as his own. He was being gradually divested of his loose shirt as Jack mouthed a path down his chest, his stomach, not stopping even when he disappeared beneath the blankets.

Norrington had more or less let his body respond to the attack while convincing his mind that this was not happening. Denial, however, was flung out the window when Jack lowered his mouth to suck at him through his breeches. Suddenly he had no mind, no body, only the heat soaking through the thin material to take him over.

Jack flung off the covers with one arm. The sudden flood of cool air evoked winter at school – his own slim adolescent hands shaking as they negotiated laces and buttons at the waist of a red-haired boy – the wine cellar – Jack tugged at Norrington's belt and he remembered the belt of his father and its steel buckle –

He came out of Jack's spell and shoved him off, away, not caring if he fell, scrambling out of the bed so quickly he was dizzy.

Jack sighed in irritation and reclined against the headboard, nightshirt pulled indecently up to his thighs. Norrington felt his gaze drawn in that direction and looked forcefully away.

"I knew it," Jack told the ceiling lazily.

Norrington could do nothing but stare at him in incredulity. "Knew what?"

"About you," he replied, turning his head and fixing Norrington with a cocky grin. "Knew it the

minute I saw you, what you wanted, what you are –"

"Sh-shut up," Norrington said, appalled to find himself stuttering, something he hadn't done since he was a small child. He waited until his voice was under its normal state of control before he spoke again. Jack just lay back with that slow infuriating smile on his face, watching him like he was prey.

"You're wrong, Sparrow, and you're *sick*," he finally ground out between clenched teeth.

"Actually," said Jack, rubbing his chin reflectively and deliberately misinterpreting, "I think I may be on the mend. Had to nearly suffocate myself under the pillows to get my face hot so you'd crawl in with me. Not that you needed much prompting." He smirked, eyes traveling up and down Norrington's body, lighting between his legs at the spot he'd made damp.

Norrington discovered that he had backed up into the chair. He sank down onto it, pressing the heels of his hands against his closed eyes.

Immediately he could feel Jack's warm breath against his skin as the other man leaned close.

"You're shaking, Gabriel."

"Don't," he whispered without looking at Jack. Whether he meant 'don't use my name' or 'don't touch me,' he wasn't sure. Probably both. Jack had no idea what he had done – what he was still trying to do.

Cool fingers lifted Norrington's hands away from his overheated face and laid them at his sides. Norrington looked down at the floor, Jack's legs as he knelt on the bed at the edge of his vision.

"Look at me," Jack said, his voice oddly gentle. He cupped Norrington's cheek in one hand, but removed it when Norrington flinched away. "Let me help you –"

Norrington shook his head. "No, Jack." His voice was firm again. "Please." He could hear the desperation behind his words and he was ashamed, but not nearly as much as he knew he would be if he accepted Jack's proposal.

Out of the corner of his eye, Norrington saw Jack sit back on his heels, seeming to consider.

After a moment he said, "All right, then." Lulled by the even tone of his voice, Norrington made the mistake of meeting Jack's eyes. They were snapping with anger and passion. "I'll leave you alone.

"But you remember this, Commodore," Jack continued, sounding vaguely threatening, his palms resting on his thighs. "We are who we are. You can't remove the way you love from your blood any more than I can remove the seawater from mine. I've tried to leave the sea behind, lad – believe that if you believe nothing else. It won't do. It would kill me, as this'll kill you too, slowly, if you let it. Look at how *miserable* you are, mate – "

"You are fond of self-indulgent speeches," said Norrington coolly, getting to his feet. "Get some rest or your fever will return."

With a long-suffering sigh Jack fell back onto the pillows. "Your wish is my command, sir."

Norrington was at the door when he paused. There was something he had to ask, now that he knew what he knew, and knew it for certain.

“Captain Sparrow.”

“Commodore Norrington.”

“Did you – the blacksmith boy – were the pair of you...”

“No,” he responded flatly. “I loved his father. I wouldn’t’ve.”

Norrington nodded and left the room, collapsing onto his own bed. He slept in his clothes and dreamed of long black hair threaded with beads, and of saltwater kisses.

In Which There Is a Non-French Little Death

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jack had been lying awake for hours when Norrington came in the next morning with a tray of tea and toast. He set it carefully down on the bedside table, eyes flicking quickly to Jack and then away, looking like nothing so much as a squirrel come down to the ground.

Studying him over the top of the cup, Jack tried to piece together the various thoughts that had run through his head over the night. He'd thought it might be easier to see the man again, but it did not simplify things. Norrington's obvious nerves, for example, were serving the dual purpose of making him sympathetic and irritated. Jack hated when other people were complicated because it meant he was supposed to be simple, and that was one thing he'd sworn never to be.

"You don't have to act so twitchy," he grumbled, gnawing on a piece of buttered toast. "I'm not going to fling myself at you again." Yet, he added mentally.

"I am not twitching," said Norrington, with a nervous twitch of his shoulders.

At first Jack rolled his eyes, but then a connection he had not made before made him drop the food in his lap. He'd seen that rabbit look before, in the eyes of youths and maidens who'd suffered at the hands of previous partners.

"Did somebody –" He was surprised to hear his voice come out as a low growl and paused to clear his throat. "Has anybody ever hurt you, mate?"

Norrington frowned at him, his fidgeting fingers momentarily still. "What do you mean?"

"A man," Jack clarified quietly, noting how he blanched. "Taking what's meant for pleasure and turning it to pain. Last night –"

"I don't want to talk about last night, except to say that it will never happen again," Norrington broke in harshly. "And the answer to your extremely inappropriate question..." He scowled and shook his head as if the very idea was an affront. "No, no one has ever – ever abused me, if that's what you are insinuating."

"Then why –" He waved his teacup in the air expressively.

"Has it occurred to you that perhaps I simply don't want you?"

Jack wondered if he had any idea how much his blushing undermined a statement like that. But he decided to let it go, because dealing with whatever problems Norrington was hiding from had a tendency to induce headache.

"Nonsense," he declared gallantly, spreading his arms wide. "It is mechanically, mathematically, scientifically, and in all other ways inconceivable that anyone could possibly not want Captain Jack Sparrow."

Norrington stared at him, tried to speak, shook his head. Finally he managed, "How are you able to fit through doorways and hatchways with such an inflated opinion of yourself, Sparrow?"

"You know," Jack replied thoughtfully, sipping his tea, "I don't know."

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His day, typically monotonous and looking to be even worse due to the events of the night previous, was thankfully interrupted in late afternoon. While Norrington wandered somewhere off to be antisocial, Will and Elizabeth kept him company in the study.

“Still can’t believe how big you’re gettin’,” said Jack with a wry grin. “Skinny little thing you are, and now look at your belly.”

Elizabeth preened, glowing and ridiculously pretty at the height of her pregnancy. “In some ways I’m enjoying it. The one time in our lives we women are not expected to be trussed up like a Christmas goose.”

Jack let out a contented chuckle. Elizabeth was more than refreshing after the morning he’d spent with Norrington. He noticed that Will’s head was drooping, his chin bobbing against his chest. “I think your husband has fallen asleep.”

She turned to Will with a sigh, drawing his head down onto her shoulder, an expression of indulgent exasperation on her face. “He’s been insufferable lately. Last night he was up for hours, fretting about some ridiculous theory that we’re all born with an instinctual fear of fire, so he thinks the baby will smell the forge on him and not be able to stand him. I *know*,” she groaned at Jack’s incredulous look. “And that’s not even the worst of it. Last week he kept going on and on about how he had nothing to contribute to the baby’s sense of its heritage because he can’t trace his family back beyond his parents.” She stroked a curl away from Will’s eyes and rubbed her stomach absently. “And he’s starting to hover around me, asking to help if I so much as bend over or reach for something on a shelf or sneeze.”

“It runs in the family,” Jack assured her. “Bill got a letter from Kate while we were out on a voyage, sayin’ she was expecting, and damned if he didn’t faint dead away. Man you couldn’t knock down with a ten-pound shot, but he fell right over the moment he read about young Will’s imminent arrival.”

Elizabeth got that light in her eyes, the same as her sweetheart's whenever he told them about William Turner the elder. He could never refuse the two their bedtime stories, even when the memories hurt as badly as this one did. Things had been strained between them on that trip, even worse so than usual once the news came.

“Drove everybody crazy for the next coupla months,” Jack continued, forcing a smile onto his face that was at least partially sincere. “I can’t imagine what she did with him when he got back. I would’ve walloped him at least twice a day.” A pause for the closing line. “Actually, knowing Kate, she might have.”

She laughed, as had been the desired effect. Judging by how relaxed she looked and how Will was out like a light, Jack figured it was a good time to make some of the inquiries he’d been turning over in his mind.

“So, my landlord of late,” he began, careful to keep his voice neutral. “What’s the story behind him?”

“Gabriel? I’m not sure what you want to know.”

“Oh, where he comes from, what he did before he came here – he courted you once, you must’ve got to know him at least a little bit.”
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Elizabeth shrugged. “He’s not the easiest person to get to know, if you haven’t noticed.”

With a snort, Jack replied, “Believe me, I know it.”

“Well, he came over from England with us nine years ago. He was always quiet, but nice enough. I know his men respect him and are fervently loyal, especially the lieutenants Gillette and Groves.”

Jack remembered them from the *Dauntless,* mostly by the way they looked at each other. He wondered if the Commodore knew that two of his men were sporting behind his back, and seriously enough to be giving each other such hungry, love-struck looks in plain moonlight. Perhaps it was a spot of knowledge he might use to his advantage, as well as whatever else Elizabeth might tell him.

“His father’s Navy as well,” she was saying. “Retired in London if I recall correctly. His mother died when he was young – we had that much in common, at least.”

“Surely he isn’t the eldest son?”

She shook her head. “No, he has at least one older brother, maybe two, and sisters – one older and three younger. I think that may be why he often talked to me on the crossing – he must have missed them.”

Made sense, Jack thought. To come from a large family and sail out to a strange place, another corner of the globe – he had probably never lost that loneliness. “How old was he?”

Pursing his lips as she thought, she finally hazarded, “Twenty or twenty-one? I believe he’s around thirty now...”

“Just a boy,” Jack murmured under his breath. He’d known Norrington had to be younger than he looked in uniform, but he hadn’t guessed that low.

Closing his eyes, he was struck by a sudden, crystal-clear impression of Norrington alone in his cabin on the great ship, his feet sticking out over the end of the bunk, impossibly lonely and perhaps seasick from the unfamiliar waters. It was so unsettling that he was only too glad to focus on Elizabeth again.

She was giving him a look he knew, an impassive one she used whenever she was rapidly putting things together in her head.

“No particular reason why ‘m asking,” he said with a weak attempt at a nonchalant grin. “Gets boring here, is all.”

Elizabeth said nothing, but if she believed his excuse, Jack would eat his hat. Just as she was opening her mouth to gift him with what were obviously some carefully-chosen words, Will stirred in her arms.

“No, there’s soot beneath my nails!” he shouted, jerking himself awake. He blinked at his wife, confused, as she rolled her eyes.

“Not again,” she said. “Will, the baby is not going to combust or suffocate or drown or anything else when you touch it.”

He sat up sharply, glancing out the window. “We’d best get going, I don’t want you to have to walk home in the dark.”

Elizabeth squeezed her eyes shut and appeared to be clenching her teeth. Jack fought off a snicker. “It is at least a half-hour until sunset, dear,” she said with exaggerated patience.

“I’m being smothering again, aren’t I,” said Will apologetically, kissing her. “Right. I’m sorry. I’m calm. Whenever you wish to leave, I’ll agree.” He cast big pleading eyes on Jack, who let him squirm for a few moments.

“Hate to cut this visit short, but I’m feeling rather tired and I wouldn’t want to nod off like a certain blacksmith here,” he finally said with a wink at Will. The lad smiled at him gratefully and rose, keeping a hand on Elizabeth all the while.

She glanced back and forth between them as if she suspected something, but decided not to press it. “Good evening, then, Jack,” she said, bending slightly to kiss him while Will made panicked sputtering noises in the background and held on to the back of her dress.

“Get used to it, love,” he said, catching her frustrated sigh as he pressed his lips to her cheek. Rolling her eyes one more time for good measure, she walked out of the study with Will anxious at her heels and casting a distracted “G’bye Jack!” over his shoulder.

After an awkward, near silent dinner in which Jack stared unabashedly at Norrington and Norrington looked anywhere but Jack, he retired and tried to sleep, still processing what little information Elizabeth had been able to give him.

The conclusion he eventually reached was that his wooing was going to continue as planned, except that the motives were changed. Jack desired him as badly as ever, but he now wanted to have him for both their sakes. Norrington needed to be touched more than anybody Jack had ever met, and he was so shut up inside that it was going to take something drastic to draw him out. And yet draw him out Jack would, if it took him weeks to do so. Months was stretching it, maybe, but weeks he could handle. By then he ought to be well enough to go to sea, and he'd leave Norrington with the memory of a few sweet nights and a pirate he would think twice about hanging.

Despite this revelation, he was still incapable of sleeping.

Eventually he decided that rest was not going to come to him any time soon, so he dressed and went wandering down to the kitchen, hungry for something sweet and intent on seeing if the good Commodore was in possession of a liquor cabinet. He had passed Norrington’s door and decided that, as the light was off and there were no sounds issuing forth, a late-night stroll was perfectly safe.

He cursed his luck when he spotted Norrington in front of the pantry, but the other man’s posture quit of him of any thought of a snack. Norrington was kneeling on the floor, his shoulders rounded and his head bent. As Jack stepped closer, he saw the still body of Annabelle at Norrington’s feet.

“Hullo,” he said softly. Norrington made a sort of flinching movement, but he didn’t turn around. “Is she...?”

Norrington nodded slowly, fingertips gently stroking down the cat’s spine. “She – she always like to lie here in the sun. And it’s where the food lives.” He gave a little noise that was half-laugh and half-sob. Jack leaned down and hooked an arm around his elbow. Norrington didn't start at the touch this time.

“Stand up there, mate. You must be gettin’ stiff.” For once he kept all hint of lewd suggestion out of his voice. Pulling Norrington to his feet, he said, “She was a fine little feline, and she lived a long time for her kind.”

“I know.” He brushed at the tears on his cheeks with the sleeve of his nightshirt, clearly ashamed. The arm Jack was still gripping twitched, and Jack released him. “You must think me a fool,” he said bitterly. “Crying over a useless old cat.”

“No,” said Jack solemnly, “I don’t think that at all.” He wasn’t much of an animal person himself, but he meant it. “There’s no shame in caring for a creature.”

Norrington pursed his lips as he searched Jack’s eyes, seeking the double meaning in his words. Though Jack had meant none, he realized that there was nothing he could do to keep what had happened between them out of nearly everything he could say. The silence grew heavy and awkward.

Jack had a very simple solution to any awkward situation.

“Have you anything to drink, Commodore?” he asked. Norrington frowned warily at him, and he added, “We can give dear Annabelle a decent burial, and a wake to follow.” When Norrington didn’t stop with that suspicious look, he said with a sigh, “Believe me when I say it’ll make you feel better, and sleep easier.”

Glancing down at the small body at their feet, Norrington rubbed a hand against the back of his neck as he considered it. Jack felt an urge to offer him a massage and fought it down. If this new plan succeeded, he’d have no need for weeks. He squashed vague hints of guilt. What he’d said of the alcohol would hold true for any comforts he might personally offer.

Finally Norrington said in a reluctant tone, “I’ve got some Spanish brandy and a few bottles of wine in the dining room.”

“I’ll fetch us a shovel.”

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Twenty minutes later, Annabelle was at rest under a little fig tree at the edge of the vegetable garden. The two mourners were seated at one end of the large dining table, contemplating the collection of bottles laid before them.

Since Norrington was looking rather perplexed, Jack told him helpfully, “You’d best pick one and stick with it, else you’ll make yourself sick.”

“I’ll probably be sick anyhow,” Norrington muttered. “I’ve little tolerance for drink.”

Jack shrugged. He hadn’t expected anything else. “The white wine, then?”

“No,” said Norrington briskly, “I’ll take the brandy. Works faster.”

Jack couldn’t quite suppress a laugh of surprise. “That it does.” He had claimed the brandy for himself, but now he rolled it carefully across the table to Norrington. It would serve Jack whether he drank it himself or not. He watched in amusement as Norrington popped the cork and took a hearty swig. He made a face.

At Jack’s snort, Norrington fixed him with a disapproving glare.

“This is a very bad idea,” he said.

“Oh, most likely,” Jack replied airily. “Going to give me that back?”
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Norrington's jaw set in a determination that Jack recognized all too well. Still staring defiantly across the table, he tipped the bottle back again. Jack cocked his head and thoroughly enjoyed the sight of Norrington's throat working as the brandy slid down it, probably burning all the way to the pit of his stomach.

When he had finished his little display of competency, Norrington shook his head a bit like a dog shaking off water. But he was still clutching the brandy bottle, and did not look like he had any intentions of giving it up.

Jack hid a smirk behind his own bottle as he tossed back some wine.

The brandy was very good indeed. It took only half of it before Norrington was effectively gone. When Jack pulled his chair over to the other side of the table, Norrington merely smiled mistily at him, and he grinned back. Happy drunks were his favorite kind – they were so friendly and open to suggestion. Jack himself got moody and depressed when he was truly smashed, which wasn't often. Tonight he had no plans for that level of intoxication; his current warm, pleasant buzz was enough.

"Jaaaack," Norrington trilled, licking at the mouth of his bottle in a way that made Jack's trousers feel just a bit too tight. "You're so pretty," Norrington told him. He paused to frown, his lips and brows pulling tight together down the center of his face. "But you're not pretty like a girl."

"Am I not?" Jack asked, amused.

"No," said Norrington decisively in his best Commodore fashion, "not a bit like a girl. But you're pretty. Eliz'beth's pretty too, 'cept she is pretty like a girl. Turner's pretty." He paused as if Jack was supposed to say something.

"Ah, yes," he replied, thinking that Norrington was entirely too fond of the word 'pretty' at the moment.

Norrington pursed his lips in a fine pout. "Prettier than me?" he whined.

Jack snickered. "No, never prettier than you," he assured the man, who favored him with a dotty grin. His unsteady weaving brought him close to Jack.

"You know," he whispered, one finger to his mouth, looking around as if he expected someone to be listening in, "you kissed me."

It seemed Jack wasn't even going to have to steer the conversation, such as it was, in the proper direction. "Yes, I remember it well. And?" he prompted, raising an eyebrow.

"And I *liked* it," Norrington confessed fondly and tipsily. "Really I did."

"That's good to hear, Gabriel," Jack purred. He let one hand creep up Norrington's arm to his shoulder. "That's very good to hear."

Norrington chortled. "'S funny! Haven't been kissed by a boy in..." He looked up at the ceiling and stuck out his bottom lip in obviously confused thought. Jack was sorely tempted to close his teeth on it, but as he was now infernally curious about the man's past, he waited. The way he had reacted to the bedroom advance still put Jack in mind of pain.

"Long time," Norrington concluded with a bob of his chin.

"And when was that?"

“Back at school. Long, long time. Pretty, pretty red-headed boy with blue eyes...” He sighed and swayed again. Jack was suddenly afraid that he would start weeping with the memories and the alcohol. He’d seen it happen before. But instead Norrington shivered and his chin dropped down into his chest.

“Then w’got found out,” he explained. “And Father – my father – wasn’t happy, no, he was not happy a’tall.” He shook his head vigorously.

“He beat you for it?” Jack guessed. So that was it. Not something he couldn’t relate to, all things told, since his own father had been handy with a switch before he disappeared.

Norrington stopped the waving movements of his head, considering the dynamics of it before he began nodding. “Never struck me before, not in my whole life,” he said.

Jack shrugged. “Long time ago, like you said.”

“Mmmm,” agreed Norrington, seeming pleased that he had said something worth Jack’s repetition. Smiling vaguely again, he pressed his forehead against Jack’s. “I feel nice,” he confessed in wonderment. “Warm. Happy. I never feel like that.”

“I know,” said Jack, swallowing. He caught the particular paper-and-powder scent of Norrington again, their noses touching, and heat lanced through his body.

“Make me feel like that,” Norrington murmured, urging, breathless, and he kissed Jack, letting himself fall clumsily forward so that Jack had to catch him. He adjusted his armful of Commodore and deepened the kiss, tangling their tongues together, stoking the aching need in his groin with the taste of almonds and cream and really spectacular brandy.

He pushed back in his chair as Norrington managed to climb onto his lap, leaning over him so that Jack had to tilt his head up to keep their mouths from slipping apart. Norrington was making little desperate sounds in the back of his throat, Jack’s hands on his hips directing him – just – *there* – and it felt so damn good, and Jack...

Jack couldn’t do it.

He pushed Norrington away, back against the edge of the table.

“Burnin’ *hell*,” he hissed, pained to feel that blessed warm weight lift from where he wanted so badly to have it.

Norrington tried to kiss him again and Jack fended him off.

“What?” Norrington wanted to know, voice peevish. “What’s wrong?” He peered closely at Jack, bewildered.

Raising a hand to his temple as he felt another headache coming on, Jack sighed with regret. “God, I can’t b’lieve I’m doing this,” he moaned.

Norrington’s hands were creeping up the front of his shirt, nudging and stroking. “Don’t you want me?”

“I do,” Jack said, so upset with himself that he could barely speak. He batted at Norrington’s wandering fingers and got him to perch on the dining table rather than on Jack’s own lap, which was able to clear his mind a bit. “I do,” he repeated more gently. “But I can’t go through with it. You don’t deserve this.”

Norrington was looking at him with great big sad eyes. Jack slid a hand behind his ear, soothing him and trying to will his body into a calmer state. He shouldn't have needed an explanation because he probably wouldn't remember any of this later, but Jack couldn't deny him one against the hurt and confusion in his expression.

"I wanted this, exactly this, and I thought it would be so sweet. But I can't bear the thought of the shame you'd feel come morning, and how you'd hate me."

"Oh," said Norrington in a small voice. His face contorted and he clutched at his stomach. "I don't feel very well, Jack."

Jack rolled his eyes, feeling an irrational urge to howl at the moon. He tugged on Norrington's arm. "C'mon then, we'd better get you horizontal." Though not, he thought darkly, in the way the night had been meant to end.

Norrington leaned heavily on him all the way to the bedroom, so that Jack was panting with exertion by the time he could finally dump him on the mattress. He wanted nothing more than to get some privacy and take care of his own bleak situation.

But Norrington clasped his hand as he started to leave. "Stay with me?" he pleaded.

Biting his lip to keep from shouting at the drunken bastard, Jack pulled roughly away from him and started for the door.

"Don't leave me alone," came the tiny whisper from the bed. "Always get left alone..." Then he could hear the sobs he'd feared earlier.

Jack hated crying in any way, shape or form. Though he had forced tears to get out of or into situations in the past, he didn't like to do it himself and he didn't like to be around people who were doing it.

And yet he paused with one hand on the brass doorknob.

With a virulent curse and a swift mental kick at his own balls, he turned, went back, and gathered Norrington in his arms.

"I'm only doing this so's I can witness the hangover you'll have tomorrow," he barked at Norrington, who had quieted once Jack settled in next to him and was now sleeping, head pillowed on Jack's shoulder.

Jack lay beside him, burning and furious and extremely uneasy about how this ordeal had turned out.

Chapter End Notes

Very brief homage to "The Princess Bridge" in a particular line of Jack's.

In Which a Small Bit of Hell Breaks Loose

"What," Norrington breathed, his eyes widening in panic as he took in Jack sprawled out beside him, "happened last...oh." He trailed off in a moan of pain as his splitting head made itself known.

Jack muttered unintelligibly, eyes still closed, and kicked at him.

Tasting cotton in his mouth, Norrington shielded his eyes with both arms as the streaming sunlight hit him.

"Serves you right," said Jack. Norrington cracked one eye open to peek at him; Jack's face was stony and unforgiving.

He forced his thoughts to focus, trying to remember. Had something happened – was Jack looking at him like that because he'd been no good at whatever had happened...?

The brandy – he recalled the stinging taste of it, the feel of the cool glass bottle against his lips. And he remembered dirt under his nails, digging, burying his cat. After that – that was when the brandy had come about, fueled by sadness and the welcome prospect of a companion to share it with. After that it became a bit fuzzier.

Jack shifted into a sitting position beside him, eyes narrowed and fixed on Norrington's face. "Think hard," he muttered. "*Very* hard."

Jack pressed firm against him, mouth warm and pliant under his own, tasting of sweet wine...

And then a great big blank.

"Nothing...nothing happened?" he managed to get past parched lips.

Jack snorted contemptuously. "Believe me, Commodore, if somethin' had happened, you'd *still* be feeling it."

The color that had drained from Norrington's face when he remembered the heated kisses came rushing back. Jack thrust the blankets at him as he stood, swaying slightly more than usual and clutching his head.

"Bloody unfair," he groused, the level of his voice rising to a near-shout that made Norrington wince and dive under a pillow. "I don't even bother to get good and drunk, but I'm still saddled with a sore head." He glared at Norrington as though this was all his fault. Really, it had been Jack who'd suggested drinking in the first place. What right did he think he was exercising by being cross about it the morning after?

"Why are you angry with me?" Norrington demanded.

Jack advanced on him, leaning over his prone body. "Because you're stupid," he hissed. "You're stupid and you're pathetic and you're a ruddy coward, and I *don't* want to talk to you." With that declaration, he stalked out of the room. His own door slammed three times, seeming to drive nails into Norrington's skull with each blast, before it finally stayed shut.

He was still for a second before he decided that, pounding head and shaky knees or no, Jack was not going to get the last word on this.

“What in earth was that about?” he bit out as he yanked Jack’s door open.

Jack whirled, squaring his shoulders and planting his feet in a fighter’s stance. “Get out!”

“I will not! This is *my* house! And how dare you treat me like –”

“Look, your precious Navy arse is safe and untouched, so if you’d be so kind as to leave me bloody well alone, I would love to catch up on the sleep I missed last night listening to you whinge about your sad little life.”

Norrington’s mouth opened and closed a few times before he managed to tighten the rein on his anger a bit. He pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. When he spoke again, his voice was calmer. “I – I suppose I owe you gratitude for not taking advantage in my state of –”

“Ha!” Jack’s sudden burst of laughter was harsh. “Taking advantage, you say? Let me tell y’something, Commodore, I would have been doing no such thing. Last night you were begging me for it, mate.”

“Begging – you lying, self-absorbed wretch –”

“Aye, *begging*,” Jack continued as if he hadn’t spoken, eyes storming, “and more fool I for saying no, since God knows you could use a decent buggering. ‘Course that’s only if you’re still capable of feeling anything under that stiff ‘n proper uniform –”

“Feeling?” Norrington snapped. His hands had clenched into fists at his sides. “Are you actually entertaining the absurd notion that I could ever have *feelings* for a thieving rake such as yourself?”

“Oh no,” Jack spat out, “that was never what this was about. I may have wanted to fuck you –” His eyes glinted in triumph as Norrington flinched at the harsh language. “But you’re useless for anythin’ else. Y’do what you’re told and that’s all you do, and you mean *nothing* to anyone with a scrap of humanity left.”

“And you’re fit only for the crows to peck at Gallows Point!”

“*So hang me then*!” Jack bellowed, before his eyes widened with surprise as his legs gave way and he dropped onto the bed.

Without a thought Norrington was beside him, guiding him back against the pillows. His skin was a cheesy pale color and he closed his eyes the minute his head fell on soft down.

“Jack?” he said, choking on the bitter taste their mutual vitriol had left in his mouth.

Shoving his hands away, Jack flopped over onto his side. “Go.” He still sounded angry, if a little less vehement about it.

Norrington wavered, one hand on Jack’s shoulder.

“Don’t, Gabriel. Just...leave me.”

The half-formed apology on his lips fled when Jack pointedly recoiled from his touch, and hot fury, cooled at the sight of Jack’s strength faltering, surged forward once again.

“Fine,” he said shortly.

He slammed the door behind him, forgetting about his aching head until the crash echoed through

the hallway. Clasping his skull in both hands, he sank down against the wall and tried to breathe normally.

Of all the – Sparrow was the most insufferable, incorrigible – should have let him hang – should have let him rot –

He needed to get away. He could no longer think in this house.

Norrington was not good at making split-second decisions. He liked deliberation, he liked planning, and he liked to go into a situation with all logical outcomes carefully weighed in his mind.

But he was in pain, and he was angry. And it was not the first time in his life he'd thought to solve a problem by leaving it to its own devices.

Just as he was nodding to himself, Mrs. Perry came warily around the corner. "Commodore Norrington, sir? I heard yellin'..."

Norrington got to his feet slowly, feeling a weight lift off of his shoulders. "I do apologize if we frightened you, Mrs. Perry."

"We, sir?"

"Perhaps I'd better explain...".

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Jack, meanwhile, decided to blame his trouble on his pillows.

He tore apart the first with shaking hands, satisfied by the ripping sound and downright giddy from the feathers bursting all over the bed. The second he knocked around a bit before gritting his teeth and destroying it as well.

"Bloody – stupid – Commodore," he growled, tearing at a corner of the pillow with his teeth and spitting out fluffy down.

When he was done, the bed and his skin littered with feathers, he sat back against the headboard, panting from exertion and clutching his throbbing head. His abstinence from drink during his illness must've caused the wine to affect him more than it should have. That would do wonders to help explain his ridiculous behavior. He'd had a drunken, squirming, practically naked Norrington in his lap and he had done nothing about it.

He should have taken him. He'd *wanted* to take him. If he had just been able to concentrate on the man he'd been kissing, it would not have been a problem. But he'd kept seeing the idiot as he must have – *might* have – been years ago, on the crossing from England, at a drafty English academy with that red-headed boy he'd been licked for, surrounded by little green-eyed sisters. And he saw him as he was now, playing with his cat, watching Jack spin a tall tale, the look on his face when Elizabeth had rejected him all those months ago.

Jack didn't notice abruptly falling asleep, but he woke some hours later with the same damned headache and a new inkling of regret. He could tell himself all he liked that buggering Norrington while he wasn't lucid enough to think better of it was for the man's own good, but the sudden attack of conscience he'd had told him otherwise. The rage he'd directed at Norrington earlier had merely been his own anger at himself, at the knowledge that he'd done something right for a change and it had cost him what he wanted. The hurt in those wide eyes had been gratifying at the
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time, but now the memory only shamed him.

He glanced out the window. It was a bit past noon and Norrington ought to be back soon with a spot of luncheon. Jack would swallow his pride and –

“Apologize,” he said aloud, testing the sound of it. It had a sour taste, but maybe that was just his own breath.

A rattle outside the door announced the arrival of a tray and, presumably, the Commodore. Jack sat up straight and fiddled with what had once been a fine lady’s earring in his hair.

What came through the door was not a tall, handsome Commodore, but rather a short, older woman balancing the tray competently on one ample hip.

Jack stared.

“Well, well,” said the woman with a thick Scottish accent, “so this'd be the famed Captain Jack Sparrow.” She ran critical eyes over him. “Angry puppy indeed, laddie.”

Jack blinked a few times, but the apparition didn’t go away. Instead she came over and set the tray down next to his bed, fussing with some soup and bread.

“Wouldn’t my Martin be pleased to hear ‘bout you, now, if th’ Commodore hain’t sworn me to secrecy.”

“Where is he?” Jack burst out.

The woman clucked her tongue sympathetically. “He’s gone out t’ sea, left near an hour ago. Put you in my care for so long ‘s he’s gone –”

He struggled to get up, his limbs suddenly weak. With a hum of disapproval, the woman easily held him down.

“The *Pearl*,” he cried, “I have to get back to ‘er...”

Fleshy hands were laid upon his face and he tried to wriggle away from them.

“Oh dear, you’re burnin’ up. How long’s it been like this?”

The suffocating sense of fever overtook him once again, the familiar ache and burn. He let the woman lay him back against the remains of the pillows – “Now why’d ye go and do a thing like tha’, eh?” – and turned his face to the side.

Norrington had left. Just like that, not a word of goodbye, not a single word. He’d gone where Jack couldn’t go, and most wanted to.

He shut his eyes against the light in the room.

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Norrington stood on the deck of the *Dauntless* with his hands clasped behind his back, surveying the preparations. His men were clearly happy to be at sea again, and it was a feeling he tried to share.

He wondered if Jack was awake right now, if Mrs. Perry was explaining matters to him. He was under no illusions that the pirate would still be there when he got back. He’d probably leave before
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the day was out; he wasn't so ill that he couldn't survive a few weeks abed in his own cabin.

The thought was alarming and Norrington felt ridiculous. Of course he'd have to leave sometime. The notion of Jack staying anywhere for long was absurd, and the notion that he'd stay with Norrington was not even worth mentioning. He didn't want to stay; Norrington most certainly did not want him to stay.

And yet when he closed his eyes he could see the inviting smile flash at him – *for* him – no one had ever looked at him the way Jack looked at him –

He's not yours, a cruel voice in his head whispered. *To keep him would be to break him, and to give up everything you've spent your life working for.*

No smile, however sweet, was worth that. No pair of black eyes, no pair of scarred skillful hands, no slim tanned body, no amount of easy laughter...

It was only his body wanting Jack, and as his body had betrayed him in the past, there was no reason to trust it.

No reason at all.

In Which Dreams are Tricky Little Buggers

It was difficult to tell for Jack to tell when he was asleep and when he was awake. He saw some people in both worlds – Elizabeth, Will, the woman who brought water and fresh blankets and sometimes took away the pain. Others he felt were trying to bleed from one into the other – Norrington, for one, who had something of a right as it was his own house. When he talked, which wasn't often, his words were so quiet Jack couldn't hear them. The others had no business being there. Barbossa, who sneered and winked and waved golden apples in his face. His father, who towered over him as he'd done when Jack was a boy, and his mother, who patted him absently on the head and ignored whatever troubles he got himself into. Bill, who looked at him gravely and said nothing, sometimes with Kate hanging on his arm and whispering in his ear. It was near a fortnight before he was well enough to make sense of the sights and sounds again.

"Thought ye were a goner for certain," said Mrs. Perry one afternoon, shortly after Jack's victory of being able to keep a solid meal down, as she was changing the sweat-soaked linens on his bed. Jack was curled up in the armchair, fiddling with a last remaining feather from the pillows he'd destroyed. "But ye've got some fight in you, pirate, ain't no doubt about that."

He said nothing, staring down at the feather in his hand. Lethargy was not a feeling to which he was accustomed and he was stubbornly trying to deal with it. Mrs. Perry paused, drawing the cover back, to squint at him.

"You must be right mis'rable, pinin' for the sea and the Commodore both."

That got a reaction. Jack goggled at her as she calmly drew him up by an elbow. "I am not pining for Norrington!"

"Lie down, man, and stop glarin' at me like that. Would there be some other reason, then, why you been callin' out his Christian name in your sleep?" She fussed at the pillows as she forced Jack down.

Though he had left behind shame for his attraction to men round about the same time as he'd discovered it, Jack understood that there was a time and a place for indulgences that would earn him a noose faster than he could blink, and that extended to discussion and acknowledgment of same. Bustling, matronly Mrs. Perry's casual questioning was outside his considerable range of experience, and he found himself in the unfamiliar predicament of speechlessness.

The housekeeper's sharp gray eyes softened a touch. "No need t' worry that I'll be runnin' off to see you hauled away, now. When my dear nephew Gregory shot hisself because his chosen sweetheart happened to be a lad, I promised meself I'd never judge a soul on how he gets by beneath his sheets."

It was difficult to tell without a mirror and it could just be a lingering bit of fever, but Jack thought the warmth in his face might have been the first time he'd blushed in twenty-five years.

Mrs. Perry tucked blankets around him as she continued. "And the Commodore, 'e's been on a strange tide for the past couple months, so's I knew somethin' was up wiv'im. T'weren't this bad when he was courtin' Miss Elizabeth, I can tell ye that. Some days he's grand an' gracious, an' some days in the foulest temper I ever seen." A flour-scented finger stabbed at the air in front of his nose. "Now I know who's t'blame and I've gotten a good look at ye, I can offer a warnin'. You're pirate through and through, Jack Sparrow, an' I can't put a stop to yer stealin' his heart. He's a good lad, with a good, pure heart, an' if ye break it I'll have a pound o' flesh for ev'ry ship

ye've ever raided."

For a moment, Jack expected her to add a 'savvy?'.

She pinched his upper arm hard. "That clear, Sparrow?"

"Yes'm," Jack squeaked quickly. Now his cheeks were definitely flaming.

"Eat," said Mrs. Perry crossly as she settled a tray of soup on his lap.

Jack obeyed and continued in his quest to think about Norrington as little as possible. He was surprisingly adept at putting the man out of his mind, even though he spent every waking hour in his house; he suspected it came from years of trying to keep the *Pearl* at the back of his thoughts.

Just as he had during those ten years, however, he paid the price for it in his dreams. And was he allowed to dream of Norrington romping in his bed, as he had before the great brandy fiasco? Of course not – fate had far more effective players in her grip.

"Bill?"

He was there, solid and study as always, broader in the shoulders and quicker to smile than his son. Jack reached a hand out to him before he could form thought, but Bill shook his head even as he flashed that grin reserved for Jack and Jack alone. Kate had her own claim on Bill's many smiles, but this one had always been his.

"A dream, then," Jack sighed in resignation.

"'Course a dream," said Bill. " I'm dead, ain't I?"

Jack looked around. They were in the *Black Pearl*'s hold, perfect down to the last detail, except that the hatch was missing entirely. He supposed he ought to feel trapped and panicked, in the belly of a ship with no way out and probably little air, but it was only a dream, and only his own *Pearl*.

"Haven't dreamed of you in a long while," said Jack to Bill in a perfectly conversational tone.

Bill's eyebrows twitched upwards. "Thought you dreamed of me near every night."

Jack scowled. "That thing of bone and rot? 'S not you, Bill."

"True enough," his dead lover replied evenly. "I hear you've gotten yourself into a right mess here."

"Don't I always?" Jack twirled around with a flourish.

"Aye," said Bill, "but this time's different."

"You're talking about the Navy boy, are you not?" He snorted contemptuously. "Bloody great idiot, is ol' Commodore Norrington."

Bill sighed and shook his head. "You can play the fool with lotsa people, Jack, but never with me, no matter how you tried."

"And I did try," said Jack quietly. "Oh, how I tried when you married her."

"Aye," said Bill with a raised eyebrow, "I remember. Think it's goin' to work now when it

wouldn't then?"

Jack raised a hand to tug on a twisted lock of hair. "You just hear to upbraid me, Bill? Could've gone to pretty much any place in Port Royal for that."

"No," Bill replied evenly. "Just offering some advice."

"And that would be?"

Bill fixed him with a critical eye, years of knowing and caring for him coalesced into a single look that made him shift uncomfortably. "Only this: you love too well to never do it again, Jack. Even if y'are damned thick-headed about coming 'round to it."

"Is that why you left us, Bill?" He dismissed the first bit as irrelevant, absurd.

"Don't be unfair now," Bill admonished. "Kate had nothin' to do with you, or you with her. I couldn't help how things turned out."

Jack scuffed his toes along the floorboards. "I know," he said grudgingly.

Bill smiled that smile again and clapped him on the shoulder. "You think on what I said." He turned to go, though Jack had no idea where as they were still locked in the hold with no apparent way out. Bill paused to look back over his shoulder. "And Jack, remember I know all your tricks – you stop giving those slit-eyed glances to my son and his bride!"

Jack chuckled. "As if they'll ever be able to see anything but each other."

"Kiss my granddaughter for me," said Bill as he faded back into the shadows of the hull. Jack went to the place he'd disappeared, pounded on the boards. They held.

He woke with a cry muffled against his own arm, the dream hazy in his mind. Only the feelings remained sharp – longing and loss, memory turned to bone and yet tempered by hope.

Wrapping a quilt around his shoulders, he got up slowly, still shaky on his feet, and shuffled to the window. A cloud passed over the swelling moon.

He wouldn't leave until Norrington was back. Some kind of accord had to be reached between them or they'd both go mad.

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Norrington lay awake in his bunk, looking out at the three-quarter moon with his hand behind his head. Sleep had come easily the first few days aboard, but it was getting harder and harder to close his eyes in an attempt at rest. He had not left Jack behind as he'd intended. Instead he dreamed of him too often – hot, heavy dreams that left him soaked and shaking, his fist stuffed in his mouth for fear of waking others. Not since boyhood had he been troubled by this embarrassing manner of dreaming, but it seemed nature was making up for lost time.

With a sigh, he rose and dressed perfunctorily, in just breeches and a shirt. Gillette ought to be getting off his watch and he had earlier mentioned a book Norrington might be interested in. It would be something to kill the time, and somebody to exchange words with, brief and impersonal though they would be. He'd found that he missed Jack's constant chattering far more than he would have thought possible.

Outside the door to the small cabin next to his own, traditionally awarded to lieutenants, he raised
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his hand to rap on it just as he heard a soft cry. Recalling that Gillette was nursing a broken wrist, he opened the door without completing his knock.

“Oh,” he said faintly to the sight greeting his eyes: Gillette braced against the far bulkhead, his auburn hair tied loosely back, a dark-haired man kneeling in front of him. Blue-green eyes shot to his own as Gillette gasped in shock. The other man turned his head and Norrington recognized him as Second Lieutenant Groves.

Gillette scrambled to close his breeches as Groves shot to his feet in what was a quite impressive display of athleticism.

“My apologies,” he managed to stammer. “Should have knocked.” He bolted from the room, making sure to close the door firmly behind him, and retreated to the sanctuary of his own cabin.

Shock was foremost on his mind, quickly followed by mild resentment. If Gillette had only stayed behind on account of his wrist, as Norrington had politely suggested but unfortunately not ordered, he wouldn’t have had to see that. He felt he should also be plagued by disgust, by righteous anger, but even if he had been, it would only have named him a hypocrite.

Some five minutes later, there was a timid knock on his door. He had a decent idea of who it might be.

“Come in,” he called, suddenly feeling extremely weary.

Gillette, fully dressed and with his wig on, entered, looking so absolutely terrified that Norrington could feel nothing but pity.

A dark head poked in after him and he spun, trying to push it back. “Let me handle it, Theo!” he could Gillette hiss.

“We’re doing this together or we aren’t doing it at all,” came the normally mild voice of Groves, now tight with strain.

Both of them stumbled into his cabin, Groves apparently having shoved Gillette forward. His eyes were worried as well, though not with the same panicked depth as those of his -- his lover, Norrington supposed, turning the word curiously over in his mind.

“Have a seat,” he said, gesturing to the chairs in front of his small table. He sat down behind it, hoping his blush wouldn’t show in the candlelight. Jack had claimed he wouldn’t color so fiercely if he would just get some sun, but he at least had the comfort that Gillette, with his fair complexion, was outmatching him.

They sat before him and the difference between them was curious. Both were resigned, but while it seemed to settle on Groves like a solid weight, Gillette looked as though he was going to jump up at any moment and perhaps take flight.

“Well,” said Norrington, glancing from one to the other. Gillette looked quickly down, swallowing hard. Groves looked back at him, jaw set. “How long?”

“Over a year,” came the reply from Gillette, frank as always.

“Just before the raid on the town,” Groves added. Gillette shot him a sickened look, as if he’d given too much information.

Norrington cleared his throat. They were both looking at him anxiously, now and then glancing at

each other out of the corners of their eyes. And just like that, he understood the nature of the fear he saw: not for the self, but for the other. Any humor he might have felt at the situation immediately fled him.

“I can’t protect you if anyone else should find out,” he said quietly.

Groves sat back straight in his chair, nearly rocking it. Gillette just blinked at him.

“Do you understand?” He tapped his fingers on the desk, nervous, then stopped because the gesture felt like something Jack would do.

“Yes, sir,” said Groves, relief flooding his tense face. He flashed Norrington a quick, bright smile as he got up.

“But –” Gillette began, still staring at Norrington, expecting something quite different from his superior officer.

Groves tugged gently on his sleeve. “Andrew, let’s go.”

“You’ve been dismissed, Lieutenant Gillette,” said Norrington, not unkindly.

Gillette allowed Groves to pull him out of the cabin. A few minutes later Norrington could hear soft laughter coming through the wall before silence fell. Of course, Norrington thought – they would have had to learn to be quiet.

Over a year and he hadn’t known, hadn’t suspected a thing.

Jack would probably think the whole situation hysterically funny.

Norrington kicked the leg of his desk in frustration. Could he not go a quarter of an hour without thinking of the man? One night, yes, he could accept that as too much to expect, but this was preposterous.

Getting undressed and back into bed, he clutched a pillow in his arms and began a mental chant. *Stop thinking about him, stop thinking about him, stop thinking about him...*

He started as what felt like breath stirred across his face. But no, he was alone in the cabin, it must have been the ghost of a breeze.

Norrington rolled onto his stomach and buried his face in the pillow. By the time he’d picked up his silent repetitions again, the breeze had brushed over the back of his neck.

Craning his neck sharply, he looked up to see eyes glinting down at him in the darkness.

“Having trouble sleeping, Commodore?” Jack’s voice was just above a whisper. Norrington couldn’t move, could only stare as the bed dipped beneath the weight of another body.

“How?” he gasped.

He felt the elegant roll of shoulders as Jack urged him over onto his back. “Pirate, remember?” With a grin gleaming in the moonlight against his dark skin, Jack straddled him, reaching down to clasp hands that had been raised to push him away or to draw him closer – Norrington wasn’t sure which he'd had planned, but he forgot to be concerned about it when Jack rocked down onto him, firm erection encouraging his own cock into hardness.

Head falling back on the pillow, he bared his neck and Jack took the unconscious hint, bending

down to scrape lips and then teeth across it.

“Jack,” he breathed.

“Shhh, love,” Jack replied, fingers tightening around his own as his thighs tightened around Norrington’s hips. He let go one of Norrington’s wrists to reach between their bodies and slide up under his shirt to take him in a rough, sure hand.

Louder, far more desperate: “*Jack...*” Tangling his newly freed hand in the thick mane of black hair, he tried to pull him down for a kiss, but Jack shook his head and arched up, away.

“Hush,” he said soothingly. Norrington moaned as the heat collected low in his belly was called up by the agonizingly slow strokes along his length. “Remember where we are. Don’t want to bring the whole company down upon us.”

Another cry of Jack’s name escaped his lips and he followed it with a hissed, “I can’t, I can’t, please –”

Responding to his frantically grasping arms, Jack finally leaned down to smother the sounds he couldn’t suppress with a kiss that burned as brightly as the sun he had watched set a few hours before.

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Groves sat up in bed, staring at the wall between the lieutenants’ cabin and the commodore’s. Had he been imagining –

“*Jack...*”

No, he told himself in astonishment. Commodore Norrington’s determination to capture Jack Sparrow was well-known, even more so among his men. He would not have been surprised if Norrington dreamed about catching Sparrow or losing him, saying his name in anger or frustration.

But there was no mistaking or misinterpreting a moan like that.

Well. That was just...interesting.

Gillette stirred, poking his head up to peer fuzzily at Groves. “What is it?”

Groves waited for the sound to come again, but it did not. “Nothing,” he murmured, settling back down and kissing the fringes of his companion’s gingery hair. “I’m rather anxious to get back to Port Royal, that’s all.”

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“Damn,” Norrington muttered in the morning when he awoke to find his sheets soiled once again. It had felt so real this time – it had even been onboard the *Dauntless,* in his own cabin rather than against the gunwale or down in the brig. These nightly hauntings, inconvenient and embarrassing though they were, seemed almost preferable to being back at home with the man himself. In his dreams there was no awkwardness between them, or if there was, it would be easily overcome. It wasn’t real, of course, but it was neither as confusing nor as dangerous as the real thing.

A few weeks more – supposedly there was a Chinese pirate crew terrorizing the waters around Hispaniola, and trawling for them would take at least that long. A few weeks to give Jack time to clear out if he hadn’t already.

A few weeks to give himself the chance to adjust to the concept of a newly empty house, no Annabelle, no lusty pirate captain, no twice-weekly visits from the Turners.

Perhaps a month, he thought soberly as he bundled his sheets up.

In Which Norrington Comes Home

Jack had a brand-new condition for which he could blame Norrington: extreme boredom.

He couldn't remember ever being so bored and listless in his life. Mrs. Perry was a bosom companion as far as housekeepers went, but there was a limit to how long she would put up with him. Conversely, Jack could only watch Will and Elizabeth nestle and coo at each other and the unborn babe for so long. He'd taken to playing chess with Elizabeth with Will at his forge, but it irked him how often she won.

The study entertained him up to a point, but fussing with Norrington's things eventually grew tiresome as well. Occasionally he scripted conversations between himself and the absent Commodore, which were not nearly as satisfying now that he'd seen so many sides of the man and found him more difficult to predict.

Within a week of his recovery from the relapse, he was so anxious to get out of the house that he was fully willing to risk being caught and arrested with no Norrington around to protect him or tell him he was being an idiot. After a considerable amount of planning and some good old-fashioned wheedling, he convince Mrs. Perry to help him concoct his disguise. Three days later, a distinguished gray-haired gentleman was seen leaving the Commodore's residence, leaning on a cane and nodding sternly to whomever he passed on the streets.

Jack had such fun developing a history for Norrington's visiting uncle Sir Charles that he entirely failed to notice his disguise was not working. It was only after a few days of gallivanting about Port Royal's more premiere establishments, purse fattened with Norrington's money, that he caught the indulgent little smirks Mrs. Perry gave him whenever he went out.

"What?" he said indignantly. "I'm dressed like a respectable citizen and y'can't see my hair or beard or anything. There's the teeth, yes, but not much I can do about that –"

The housekeeper chuckled. "Haven't ye figured it yet, Mr. Sparrow? Th' Gov'nor may have to hang a pirate as told by his station, but most ev'rybody else thinks on ye as our own. Long as ye don't rock th' boat, so to speak, no one'll say boo because we're all eager to see the Commodore come home and find the pirate he most wants to catch livin' in his own home. It's a chase, y'see, that's too entertainin' to watch to want to see its end."

Jack stroked his false beard and considered this. So Port Royal thought of him as its local celebrity, did it? Surely then nobody would mind if he stopped in a tavern or two – he'd been avoiding them on account of Sir Uncle Charles' most distinguished reputation. It wouldn't do to get Norrington in trouble, but as everyone thought Norrington was none the wiser anyway...

"You are a dear, darling woman," he told Mrs. Perry as he kissed her cheek, suffering a solid swat on his backside as he ambled out the door.

The bakery was his first stop of the morning, mostly to flirt with the baker's pretty daughter.

"Good day to you, Sir Charles," Mabel called out from behind the counter. Jack flashed her a dashing grin that made her dimple most attractively.

"Hello, what's this?" he said, catching sight of a large basket in the corner. As he crouched down beside it, a tiny orange paw reached up to bat at his swinging gray beard.

"Latest litter," was the reply. The mother cat, a fluffy tan thing with bitten ears, glared at him until

he rubbed her chin solicitously. The kittens, mewling and tumbling over each other, sniffed curiously at his hand. The tabby who'd taken a shine to his beard latched onto his fingers and began kick back legs against his palm.

Jack lifted it out, wincing – tiny though they were, its claws and teeth were sharp. "Right devil of a thing, aren't you?" he told the ginger kitten, holding it up to his face. The kitten went slack in his grip suddenly, blinking up at him with large amber eyes. He ran a thumb over the striped markings on its head and it arched its back against him, starting up a little trilling purr.

Mabel was watching him with a smile on her face. "They're just about ready to leave their mam," she said innocently. "Not sure what we're going to do with so many, especially that runty little lad there."

"You're not a runt, are you," murmured Jack to the kitten, which sank its teeth into his hand again. "Just sparing with your size. I'll bet you can slink into lotsa places your brothers and sisters can't."

The kitten merely bumped its nose against his palm.

Ten minutes later Jack left the shop with a sourdough roll in his hand and an undersized orange kitten clawing the bottom out of his jacket pocket.

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"Are you glad to be home, sir?"

Norrington favored Lieutenant Gillette with a strained smile. "In a way, as always, Lieutenant."

"Remember that we've promised to take you out drinking next week," Groves told him.

"And we will not take no for an answer," Gillette added, wagging a finger at him.

"Then I shall not attempt to refuse," said Norrington with a smile that came a bit more naturally. He watched the two men go off to see to docking preparations, marveling at their restraint. It wasn't due to his own stupidity that he'd failed to notice their closeness; they were genuinely good at keeping it hidden in public. Over the past few weeks they'd grown comfortable enough with him to share the occasional hint of affection - a hand on a shoulder, feet touching beneath the table - when the three of them were alone and they thought he wasn't looking. He surprised himself by finding it sweet, even if it did tend to make him turn pink.

Norrington wasn't entirely sure how it happened that he'd set out on this voyage with two lieutenants and seventy-two other men, and yet had returned from it with two friends and seventy-two men. He had resisted their hesitant overtures at first, but eventually loneliness had gotten the better of him and he had relaxed his rigid control over himself.

More than anything, the gradually easing camaraderie put to rest certain doubts in his mind. If he had ever thought that his responses to Jack were spurred by a mere desire for friendship and an interest in anybody who paid him the slightest bit of attention, he now knew just how wrong he'd been. Some part of whatever roil of emotions he felt toward the pirate came from the same place as his friendly inclinations toward Gillette and Groves, but far too much of it could not be so accounted for.

Not that it mattered, he told himself fiercely as he stomped down the gangplank, his mood suddenly darkening. Jack would be long gone by now, and the chances of him ever coming back and letting Norrington know about it were slim. Oh, he'd probably be here to see the Turners' baby in a month or so, but since he was well again, Norrington had no doubt that he'd see neither hide
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nor hair of him.

Epson opened the door to him with his usual air of gravity. The unfamiliar sounds of Mrs. Perry laughing in the kitchen greeted his ears before the woman herself ducked into the room, coming over to welcome him.

He didn't notice what she said, ignored her completely as she took the small knapsack from his hands, because Jack came out of the kitchen behind her.

If he'd caught the knowing smile on his housekeeper's face he would have been mortified, but he could not make himself look away from Jack. The parlor cleared quickly, without his notice, and the two of them were standing there alone, separated by the length of the room.

It was Jack who crossed that space, walked over to him and stood with one hip cocked.

"Welcome back, Commodore." His voice was quiet with an edge of amusement.

He'd dreamed of those words many times and come up with a great variety of responses. But all he could manage to say was, "You're still here."

Jack exhaled quickly, almost a snort of laughter. "Nothing escapes you, does it?" Teasing, gentle -- friendly. "I'm afraid I had a touch of a relapse just after you left. Pretty bad, it was – thought I might die, but here I am still."

Norrington bit his lower lip in a couple of different spots, entirely unwilling to guess how they might proceed from here. Surely jumping on him and knocking him to the ground would be detrimental to his fragile health.

Jack clapped his hand to his forehead suddenly. "Almost forgot – found you a new houseguest." He went to the striped sofa and knelt in front of it, sticking his head and an arm underneath. Norrington felt his body shift forward involuntarily – he'd seen Jack bent over like that many times in his head, and it always ended the same way.

After a stifled curse, Jack drew himself back out from under the furniture, something cupped in both palms.

He offered the small marmaladekitten to Norrington with a grin. Astonished, Norrington took the wriggling ball of fluff, which immediately hooked claws in his uniform and clambered up to his shoulder.

"His name's Ned," said Jack proudly.

Norrington laughed softly as a cool nose poked in his ear. "Ned? That's what we called my brother Edward, until he reached fourteen and decided he was too much of a man for such a name." He caught the kitten in his hand and cradled it to his chest, feeling its heartbeat against his fingertips. "Thank you," he said, meaning it.

Jack glanced down at the floor. "Know it's not the same –"

"Jack." Norrington put a hand on his shoulder, hardly daring to believe his own nerve, but too moved by the gift to care. "Thank you," he repeated. Jack smiled at him again, a smile that was more grounded in his eyes than in the faint stretch of his lips.

Norrington yelped and released him as Ned bit his hand.

“Oh, yes, he does that,” said Jack with a sympathetic wince.

They shared a late supper in the dining room, Jack supplying him with the latest gossip from town. He demanded explicit details about Norrington’s trip – about the weather, the water, the ship itself. Norrington fell into the conversation with an ease he scarcely noticed. Before he knew it the hour was late and they were standing in front of the door to Norrington’s room.

Jack was looking at him in a strange, searching way, not with the open desire he’d previously displayed. Norrington had absolutely no idea what he was going to do – this scenario had never come up, at least not in his waking mind, as he’d been so sure that Jack would be gone when he returned.

“I missed you, mate,” said Jack suddenly. Slowly his hands came up to either side of Norrington’s face. Norrington could only stare into those dark eyes, unable to move, to put arms around him as he thought he wanted to do. He stayed still, barring the errant tremor, as Jack leaned in, stopping with his forehead against Norrington’s, their heads not quite aligned. Norrington’s lips were parted, breath coming shallowly between them, but Jack did nothing except stand there and...and be. Be with him, be touching him, be breathing against him in a rhythm that quickened to match his own.

Then Jack pulled away. “Good night,” he said pleasantly, turning and entering his own room. Norrington listened to the door click shut and leaned his too-warm head against the wall.

He wished he could pretend not to understand. It was an offer, plain and simple, one that would not be repeated if he didn’t do his part and accept it.

For awhile he tried to pretend as he tried to sleep, tossing about in the bed where he’d last spent the night with Jack by his side. He called upon every bit of will he possessed, but he found only that his will had reoriented itself when he wasn’t paying attention. And in the end, there was only one choice he could make.

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“Jack.”

Norrington stood in the doorway, running a hand through his hair. He remembered being so nervous on the morning of his promotion that he thought he might vomit. He had directed Elizabeth to the battlements because he wanted to be sick over the side of the fort, if it was going to happen.

This was a thousand times worse.

Jack was sitting up in bed, naked. Norrington was not surprised to learn that he slept bare. He dug his toes into the rug, reluctant to leave the steadying presence of the empty hallway at his back. In the moonlight Jack’s eyes were cast in shadow, rendering them impossible to read, but Norrington could see him cant his head to the side.

“What do you want, Commodore?”

He smiled ruefully. “I used to think I knew exactly what I wanted – comfort and security, a high post in the Navy, Elizabeth or someone else as pretty. Early retirement in England. Being a fitting tribute to my father’s name. Now...” Crossing the room, his stomach tied in sailor’s knots, he sat down on the edge of the bed, facing away from Jack to gaze out the window. “Now I’m not so sure.

“No,” he corrected himself with a small shake of his head, aware of Jack’s silent gaze on him.
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“That’s not true. I want to seek out these feelings I’m having, I want to know what this – whatever this is, between us.”

“I can’t be stayin’ with you.” Jack’s arms went around him from behind. “I don’t belong here.”

Norrington leaned back into that still too-thin chest. He had never realized that you could smell the orange groves from this room, but he inhaled the scent deeply now, feeling the rise and fall of Jack’s breathing behind him.

“I know that, far better than you,” he whispered. “This is – only a temporary solution. A little peace.”

“I would give you that, if you asked.” Jack’s nose bumped against his own, a breath carrying between them. “But are you certain, mate?”

“Kiss me,” said Norrington by way of an answer.

He closed his eyes and opened his mouth to taste the salty-sweet tang of Jack once again.

“Yes,” he said, and pushed him back onto the bed.

Jack murmured “Gabriel” once, as Norrington brushed damp lips against his throat, and then he was quiet. Norrington had a chance to reflect that attention to the sensitive skin behind his ears seemed be the best way to get him to shut up, before Jack had his breeches off and there were no more coherent thoughts in his head for a long, long time.

Which Takes Place Entirely In Bed

Norrington was staring at the two pairs of legs under the sheet. They were tangled together and he could make out the curve of thighs, the bend of knees, and the faint hint of ankles, but he could not for the life of him determine which were his own. Wiggle, he thought to his toes. He could feel them obey, but it didn't make enough of a commotion for him to be able to detect which covered foot had performed the action, and he had no strength to summon a more advanced movement.

"You asleep?" Jack nudged him with a foot and all right, that one was definitely not his own, so it must be this one – he lifted the leg experimentally and rubbed it between both of Jack's – and the other, which he hooked more securely around Jack's calf.

"I was getting there, thank you," he replied, satisfied that all limbs were now present and accounted for.

Jack chuckled, running one hand up and down Norrington's forearm, mussing the fine dark hairs. "You should be thankin' me, lad. I turned out quite the performance tonight, not that I don't always."

Norrington shifted his first leg again, causing Jack to trap it and keep it still. "And I suppose I was simply a beached whale beneath you?" He marveled that he still had the fortitude to speak at all, much less make a poor jest, when his heart was only just settling back down into his body and his lungs still held a trace of burn.

"Oh, I wouldn't say that, I'd say you did very well," Jack told him sanctimoniously, "especially for your first time out on the water, as it were." The hands wandering over his body met at the small of his back and spread flat as Jack chuckled. "Very well indeed." Norrington grabbed one of the hands and brought it to his face, nibbling each fingertip before Jack wrangled out of his grasp to stroke his hair back.

"Is it always like that?" he wanted to know.

"Like what?" He could hear the rustle of beads and trinkets as Jack tilted his head to look down.

"So...so strong," said Norrington, trying to imply everything he had felt in Jack's arms with a few words, and failing miserably. "So *much*." There, that was a bit more accurate.

The hands petting him squeezed again, one around his arm and the other slightly more careful on his backside. "No, it's not always like that."

"Oh." Norrington couldn't quite keep the disappointment out of his voice, though really, if that happened on a nightly basis, he wasn't too sure he'd be able to survive his waking hours.

"We could try, though, making it 'so much,' as you put it, every time," said Jack thoughtfully, hands stroking up and down his back in alternating rhythm.

He raised his head to prop his chin on Jack's chest, looking shyly at him. "Might we try right now?"

Jack shook beneath him with a burst of laughter. "Already?"

"Well, you keep *touching* me," said Norrington sheepishly.

Hands patted his pelvis sideways to let Jack palm his stiffening cock. Norrington moved into the touch without thinking. “Dear me, Commodore, whatever have I made of you? Newly deflowered and already you’re up for more.”

Norrington’s face screwed up in a scowl, which then relaxed as Jack’s hand twisted around him. “I was not a virgin, I’ll have you know, Sparrow.” He caught his breath in a hiss as Jack pulled harder, just barely using his blunt nails.

His voice was low and rich, lazy. “You were in some respects, lad, might as well own up to that.”

“True enough,” he conceded grudgingly. He rose on an elbow to lean over Jack, who wrapped both arms around him with a pleased little grunt.

This part was going to be more difficult, but as long as they were both feeling so warm and content...“I want to – to have you,” he said haltingly, turning his face into Jack’s neck to hide his blush. “Want to make you feel what I was feeling,” he whispered against a steady pulse, which sped up under his lips.

When he raised his head again, the look on Jack’s face alarmed him a bit. It was guarded for the first time that night. “It’s been a long, long time,” Jack said, closing his eyes.

Norrington shifted uncomfortably atop him, regretting having brought it up. “If you don’t want to –”

Jack’s eyes popped open and he caught Norrington as he started to pull away. “I didn’t say that, Gabriel.” He laced his fingers together at the back of Norrington’s neck and moved him down to kiss. "No, I did not say that at all,” he reiterated after a few breathless moments which were far more convincing than any words he might have offered.

“Oil?” Norrington said, voice lowering as Jack ground wantonly against him.

“Think...it went under th’pillow...” Norrington reached under his head to scramble for it, wincing as inner muscles protested his lack of care.

“Bit sore?” said Jack apologetically. “And after I went easy on you too.”

Norrington choked out a laugh. “That was *easy*?” His fingers found purchase on the little jar and he pulled it out.

“Just wait,” Jack told him smugly, lifting his legs to hook his knees over Norrington’s shoulders. “Get your first taste o’ me and you’ll understand. What?” he added, as Norrington paused to frown down at him.

“I don’t think I could bend like that,” said Norrington, suddenly worried that this position would be expected of him at some point.

Jack stared at him for a second before he burst out laughing. If there was one thing Norrington hadn’t expected from this night, it was how light it was in certain ways, how many slow, lingering kisses and how much laughter he’d found in Jack’s bed. He’d thought the interminable wait might leave only bright scorches of heat, and though there was heat aplenty, there was also this gentle glow of affection.

“It’s not that hard,” Jack assured him, his eyes glinting merrily at his own choice of words. “Though speaking of hardness...” He reached down to tweak Norrington’s cock. “I wouldn’t mind a bit right now.”

“A bit?” Norrington replied, pretending to be offended.

“More than a bit,” Jack amended graciously. “A good deal more than a bit, in fact. Not that I can tell for certain until –” He broke off abruptly as Norrington pushed a damp finger inside him. “Yes, something like that, please.”

Norrington’s interest was piqued by the word. “Please?” he repeated, twisting and trying to find that spot within Jack he’d only just been made aware of inside himself. Jack’s hands tightened around his braced arms as he shot Norrington a warning look. “That wouldn’t be the infamous Jack Sparrow begging, now would it?” His finger curled deep inside and Jack clenched suddenly around it, sucking in air and moving against Norrington almost as if he were trying to get away.

“Oh Jesus,” Jack gasped as Norrington, growing bolder, added a second finger and brushed the spot again. “Fine, fine, I’m begging, just – *gimme*...”

“Tell me,” said Norrington roughly, enjoying the way Jack’s eyelashes fluttered and his hips bucked into the contact, “tell me that you want me.”

Surprise and a whole new degree of arousal was shuttered behind Jack’s falling lids. “Please, Gabriel,” he panted, “want you, I want you – want you inside me.” His desperate growl slid down along Norrington’s skin to make his cock throb, and he could be cruel to himself no more than he could be cruel to Jack. He withdrew his fingers to quickly coat himself and then he was sliding forward, his fingers clenching in the bedsheets as he was taken by silky heat all around him.

He moaned Jack’s name, hearing an answering cry at the edge of his sanity.

Jack had told him he’d understand. And he did – suddenly he seemed to understand everything, his life, the world, the sea, the heavens, and most of all the man beneath him. And he knew that Jack was never going to let him do this again

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Jack trembled as Norrington finally stopped teasing and entered him. God, the feel of it, the fire and the fullness and the faint sting since it had indeed been awhile – the old sense of being breached and at the same time being held together, made vulnerable but overcome with the willingness to let it happen, to lose himself in another as much as that man was buried within him. It was beautiful and it was terrifying, too, like climbing just that one branch higher than everybody else would dare or sinking that fathom deeper.

Then Norrington, after a few rapid, shallow thrusts, stopped moving.

Jack was so shocked that he went still as well. What the hell was wrong with the man? Didn’t he understand what this *meant*, what Jack was giving him at the expense of pride and fear and God only knew what else?

He did tight and rippling things to the organ spearing him, but though every muscle in Norrington’s body started to quiver, he didn’t budge.

Feeling like a child stamping his feet to get his way, Jack hissed, “What – *what* could you possibly be thinking?”

Norrington opened his eyes briefly and Jack was flummoxed to see such fear within them, the kind of fear that could stop a man cold in the middle of what Jack considered to be extremely good bedsport.
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“I’m going to hurt you,” he finally said in a broken whisper.

Oh *fuck*. Of all the times to revert to the old can’t-touch-me-I’m-the-proper-bloody-Commodore...

He bit down on his urge to scream in frustration and gentled his voice as best he could. “You’re not, love, believe it.”

Norrington’s face twisted hurtfully at his use of the endearment, normally casual but different in this light.

“You – you don’t understand,” he said, what sounded like sobs rising in his voice.

“No,” said Jack, trying to sound rational rather than pleading, “I do, I understand – it feels like darkness inside you but it’s not, it’s nothing of the sort. I know what you want to do to me and I’m telling you, Gabriel, that *I want it too.*”

There was restraint and then there was Norrington, his eyes anguished as he shook his head. “I don’t *do* this, Jack, I can’t...”

“Yes, you can,” Jack replied forcefully, pulling him down so that he rested on his elbows, most of his weight heavy on Jack. It was uncomfortable, but having him this close was the only way to solve the problem of Norrington’s asinine hesitation. He kissed him with all the conviction he could muster, tasting a need as fierce and sharp as his own. *Listen to it*, he bade Norrington silently, continuing out loud, “Feel it and trust it and...and trust *me*.”

He could sense Norrington’s resolve crumbling, his jaw clenching.

“The only one here who could possibly get hurt,” said Jack in a gravelly voice, his final entreaty, “is you, because if you don’t start moving I will chuck you right out the window. Is 'at clear?”

A breath so deep he had a momentary fear that Norrington was never going to let it out again.

“Inescapably clear,” he murmured, kissing Jack hungrily as he raised back up on his arms and surrendered.

To me, Jack thought wonderingly as Norrington thrust deep into him, pulled half-out, thrust in again, giving it to him and taking it away and then giving it again. *He does this to me and he does it for me, and I’m not even certain I had the right to ask it of him.*

“God, Jack,” Norrington cried, his brow wrinkled with concentration and the force with which his eyes were squeezed shut.

“Yes,” Jack groaned, twisting his hips to meet that driving force, urging him onward with hands at his waist. “Just like that, lad, just there...come on...”

Norrington looked down at him suddenly, his eyes almost confused as they ran across Jack’s face.

“See?” Jack said, trying to smile but finding it broken by his sharply drawn breathing. “I told you.”

A touch of humor, some acknowledgment of it even though he didn’t slacken in his movements. “I believe you now. Jack...” He glanced down between them, taking in Jack’s cock jutting out above where their bodies were joined. “Do you want me to – my hand – ”

Jack nodded wildly, the motion lost in the rocking of his body. “Please - touch me – ”

Norrington bent down to kiss him, adjusting to compensate for the loss of support from one hand,

which he used to find Jack’s leaking cock and pump it in time with his thrusts. And there was no way Jack could last under a double attack like that, not when he’d waited this long for this one man. Just a few quick strokes along his shaft and he was digging his nails into Norrington’s back, lifiting up off the bed, swearing a blue streak in more than one language as he pulsed into Norrington’s long fingers.

His timing wasn’t bad. Norrington grabbed Jack's hips, balancing on his knees and thrusting too quickly and almost too hard – once – twice – “Jack, I’m –” The aftershocks were still shaking him as he felt the hot rush inside, both heard and felt Norrington’s indistinct scream muffled against his shoulder.

For a moment he thought they were going to fall backwards due to the arch of Norrington’s spine, but after a bit of swaying he landed back against the bed, the air knocked out of his lungs.

Norrington floundered before he got enough leverage to lift himself off of Jack, who was relieved at being able to inhale again and yet absurdly saddened to feel the withdrawal of the softened member from him.

He curled against Norrington, both of them still gasping like fish out of water. As heart rates slowed and breathing returned to semi-normal, Jack ran a finger across Norrington’s lips, determined to hear him speak first.

When nothing came forth, he prompted impatiently, “Well?”

“I am...glad we did that,” Norrington said finally, decisively. “And my throat hurts, as well as...well. Other parts. I think you drew blood when you clawed me. We ought to clean this mess up or Ned won’t want to sleep with us. Jack? Jack, I’m going back to my own room if you don’t stop laughing at me.”

In Which Jack Will Be Jack

Norrington was none too clear on how he managed to drag himself to the fort the next morning. Convincing Jack to turn him loose had taken some time, as had dressing and eating and just about everything else, so he ended up being uncharacteristically late. Fortunately the first day back from a voyage was never terribly chaotic, and his morning passed uneventfully until Groves came by to drop off some correspondences. He found Norrington standing behind his desk, thoughts of Jack keeping him restless and lingering reminders of the night keeping him from sitting down.

“Thank you,” he said, taking the stack of papers and grateful for the distraction. “...Theodore,” he added hesitantly. Groves flashed him a brilliantly white smile, which he now suspected was responsible for the time Gillette had fallen out of his chair during an especially dull conference in London.

The smile faded slightly as his eyes narrowed, making Norrington fidget. Surely there was nothing on his uniform. He’d gotten a spot of jam on his cheek that morning, but Jack had taken care of it –

Norrington bit down hard on his bottom lip, feeling heat creep up his neck. “Was there anything else you needed, Lieutenant?” he managed in a tight voice.

The other man’s face had gone blank. He looked past Norrington as he spoke. “I thought I would relay certain rumors to you, sir.”

“I’ve little interest in idle gossip,” said Norrington, suspicious of the sudden blandness of Groves’ tone.

Sharp gray eyes darted to his own. “I assumed you would be interested in the talk about Jack Sparrow’s return to Port Royal.”

The breath faltered in Norrington’s lungs.

“Just whispers, really, nothing substantial. If he’s here, he isn’t causing much of a stir. He may even have adopted a disguise.” Groves paused delicately. “I’ve also spoken with a few civilians who wish to send their regards to your uncle.”

“I – I have no –” Norrington cleared his throat, mind racing. Jack was going to pay for this – and not the sort of welcome punishment he’d been describing to a scandalized Norrington earlier that day.

“You didn’t mention that your Uncle Charles was coming for a visit,” said Groves with a raised eyebrow that could have meant any one of a hundred things, punctuated as it was by that strange flat voice.

“Ah, yes, well, I’d forgotten. Busy, you know,” he said feebly, waving the correspondences for emphasis.

The carefully even surface of Groves’ face cracked, letting the beginnings of a smirk lift the corners of his lips. “You’re looking pale, Commodore. You ought to have a seat.”

Without thinking, Norrington took the suggestion and dropped heavily into the leather chair behind his desk. He shot up again with a yelp as pain flared in his backside.

He threw a baleful glance across the desk. Groves had one hand covering his mouth, but the

laughter he was holding back was evident in his eyes.

Norrington sighed and sank back down, resting his weight forward on his thighs. “How did you know?”

He’d not been expecting this from Groves; indeed, he was finding that his two lieutenants were quite different out of uniform. Gillette was quick-tempered and bold in action, but shy in conversation. Groves fought his battles with a great degree of caution, while clearly possessing a tendency to loosen his tongue in less formal settings.

“The way you were standing,” he admitted, taking a seat himself. “And – you might want to adjust –” He raised a hand to his own neck.

Norrington touched himself where Groves had indicated, his fingertips brushing across a small sensitive spot. It would, he knew, be a bruise-like purple color if he were to glance in a mirror; it was not the only one of its kind.

Tugging his cravat higher, he met Groves’ amused eyes with an embarrassed grimace.

“Far be it from me to judge you, Gabriel – if I may speak freely,” he added with a polite nod.

“Funny how unencumbered speech is something to which I’ve been subjected so often lately,” Norrington muttered.

Groves was still smiling, but he spoke more seriously. “If it is any comfort, I highly doubt your personal life is common knowledge – and I swear I’ll do my part to keep it that way.”

“Thank you,” said Norrington, relief and sincerity low in his voice.

Hefting a stone paperweight in his hands, Groves said, “I’d suggest you speak with Sparrow about his outings, though. Someone who matters is bound to notice eventually.”

Norrington cracked his shoulders. “Oh, he will be spoken with, believe me,” he said darkly.

Groves coughed against what was probably meant to be a chuckle. “I can only imagine what an...interesting time you must be having.”

“To say the least,” Norrington replied in a dry tone.

This time Groves didn’t bother to halt a sympathetic laugh. “I’ll leave you to your work, then,” he said, standing. Norrington did the same, withholding a wince.

Groves paused at the door and turned back to him. “I do have some experience with these situations, as you well know. I understand how difficult they can be.” He pulled gently at the queue on his wig, showing a bit more of the reservation to which Norrington had been accustomed. “If you should need someone to talk to – ”

The very notion of discussing the relationship, or arrangement, or whatever bond he and Jack had formed made his knuckles whiten. The sentiment was appreciated, however.

“Thank you,” he said for a third time, tipping forward almost in a bow as Groves left.

He eyed his desk. Already it was difficult to concentrate, and he wasn’t even close enough to read the writing.

This was going to be a long day.

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It felt ridiculous be sneaking into his own house, but better a careful slink through the door than being stopped and distracted by Jack. Judging by the chattering and clanging coming from the kitchen, he'd recovered from the night's activities enough to get in the way while Mrs. Perry cooked supper. Norrington crept up the stairs slowly, cursing under his breath when he landed on one that squeaked, but no one intercepted him on his way to Jack's room.

As he'd suspected, he found it all squirreled away beneath the bed: fine clothes, some of them his own, a pair of spectacles, and a perfectly coiffed gray wig and false beard.

He sat back on his heels and gazed at the collection, anger throbbing through his veins. Did the infernal pirate have any idea of the danger he'd put himself in? Did he care in the least – not only about what might happen to him, but to Norrington as well, if he'd been discovered?

Or perhaps this had been the plan to begin with. String the poor stupid commodore along, get into every nook and cranny of Port Royal's streets, size up its treasures and its defenses. The *Black Pearl* had already once made the beginnings of a very effective raid and he had no doubt that she'd be capable of greater destruction – especially if he himself could be gotten out of the picture. Tied up in the captain's cabin, perhaps, kept as a plaything, or sold to the highest bidder. A pirate who brought down a high-ranking officer, especially one with his reputation, would find himself the toast of every brigand from here to Madagascar.

Norrington had lost track of time when a pair of yeast-scented hands flowed down his lapels. He spun and stood, the wig tight in his grip.

"What is all this, Jack?"

Jack stepped back, seeing the discovery of his things and looking rightfully wary of the commodore's dangerously low voice. "Did you miss your Uncle Charles, then?" He tried a grin, but Norrington was having none of his charm.

"Did you really think you could lie to me?" he hissed, blinking eyes that were suddenly stinging. "Do you have so little respect for me that you would actually –"

"'Ey," Jack protested, his mouth tightening, "that isn't it at all, mate. I was goin' mad in this house, and p'rhaps I went on an innocent jaunt or two –"

"Innocent?" Norrington flung the wig onto the bed and kicked the buckled shoes. "Of course, Sparrow, because that is exactly your nature. So what's the town worth, then? Whose silver collection did you price? Will you be sparing the smithy, or have you already made plans to cart off Turner's most expensive weapons?" He couldn't feel the hysteria build up within him, couldn't hear how his voice had risen to a shout, but he could see how Jack's eyes began to widen.

Jack came closer to him, gritting his teeth and looking like he was thinking better of it. "Nothing of the sort. I swear it, Gabriel, swear on the *Pearl* herself –"

Norrington strode past, ignoring the hand held out to him. "Your word is meaningless to me." He slammed the door to his own room and locked it just before the handle started to turn.

He glared at the furiously jiggling handle from across the room.

"Don't know why –" A kick at the door. "–'m even bothering, but if you'd only just..." A thump that was repeated several times – Jack's forehead clunking against the wood. "Open the door, Gabriel."
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“No!”

“I am not a child, for you to speak to me as though I am,” Jack bit out, now sounding more angry than exasperated. “Nor are you, though no one’d ever know it from the way you’re behaving.”

Norrington sat down on the bed, continuing to fume, and refused to answer. After a few minutes, the sounds of breathing petered out, but Jack returned less than an hour later.

“Eat, you stubborn fool,” he called, rattling a tray for Norrington’s benefit.

“I’m not hungry,” Norrington snapped, though the scent of roast beef was wafting in and he had been too busy panicking to remember lunch.

He could hear Jack’s sigh. “Fine, then. I’ll just leave this lovely dish right here, and you sit in there and think about the cat eating it.”

Norrington wavered, but once he was certain that Jack was gone, he opened the door just wide enough to drag the tray through. Ned, racing down the hallway to investigate the delicious scent, meowed piteously when the food was snatched out from under his nose. Softening, Norrington picked up him and plopped him on the bed.

As he and the kitten shared, regret began to sink into Norrington’s stomach along with the meal.

“How can I trust him?” he asked Ned, who sniffed at an offered bit of broccoli and sneezed. “At the same time, after all that’s happened – how can I *not* trust him?”

Ned didn’t answer, but he did go cross-eyed staring at the beef cooling on Norrington’s fork. Norrington shredded it and fed him the smaller pieces, his own appetite suddenly less compelling.

“He’s a *pirate*,” Norrington said. “And not only that, he’s Jack Sparrow – slippery as an eel and sweet-voiced to anyone who’ll serve his purpose. And yet,” he continued, frustrated by the circles he was making, “when I look at him, really look at him – when he’s still long enough for me to hold onto him – I feel...” He trailed off, barely noticing the small teeth Ned sank into the heel of his hand. “I *feel*,” he concluded, his throat working hard to swallow. “And I care, and it’s all so bloody confusing, and I have no idea what I’m doing.”

Ned licked the salt from his palms. Norrington held the kitten close for a moment before he wriggled to be let free.

After letting a pacing Ned out, he tucked himself dejectedly under the covers, remembering to remove his shoes but unable to summon the energy to undress further. Jack had not returned after bringing dinner and Norrington was far too ashamed of the way he’d lost his temper to go seek him out.

He’d fallen mostly asleep by the time Jack crawled in beside him, sitting against the headboard to look down at him as he rubbed his eyes groggily.

“I’m sorry,” said Jack when Norrington shifted to sit up beside him. “I’m sorry for not telling you. But I never went out with the intent to harm.” His eyes were intense in the darkness, though his voice was mild.

Norrington studied his face, finding the same depth of honesty and kindness which had given him pause when he’d had the time to think about it. “I believe you. And I apologize as well. I thought...” He shook his head. He’d been clear enough earlier.

Jack moved forward, easing himself down onto Norrington's lap. "You thought I was using you," he said quietly, matter-of-fact in both his words and the kisses he applied to Norrington's neck, applying a soothing tongue to the bite marks. "What I fail to understand is why you can't accept that someone would want you not for what you are or what you can do for them but just...for *you*."

"I don't know," Norrington whispered, arching into the fingers kneading the muscles in his back. He had no idea at what point Jack had learned just where to touch him, and when, and how. It seemed like a power he'd brought along from the beginning, and comforting though it was, it made him tremble in something like fear.

"Well, I'm not letting you run away," Jack growled as he divested Norrington of his shirt. "Not this time."

"And the next time?" Norrington wanted to know, sadness touching the edges of his voice. "When it's time for you to run?"

Jack slowed to a stop and Norrington wondered why. It was nothing they weren't both aware of.

"If you can," he added, muffling his words against Jack's headscarf. "If I haven't caused your death."

"Gabriel –" Jack began urgently, and Norrington stilled him with a hand over his mouth.

"Don't go out again," he said, blinking back surprise at his tears more than at the tears themselves. "It's too dangerous." Jack's eyes flickered away and he allowed his voice to break the way it wanted. "*Please*, Jack."

His palm finally received a puckered kiss, so he let it fall.

"All right," said Jack grudgingly, taking a deep breath. "But I daresay I'm not in quite the danger you would –"

Norrington kissed him. It was as good as the night before, as sweet, but it was fueled by something that burned darker and ached more sharply. Though Jack held himself steady as if he waited to speak again, he ended up going boneless as moments passed in which Norrington would not release him. When he did let go it was a painful shock, all the air leaving his lungs as if he'd just hit water after a very long fall.

He was going to have to truly let go at some point, probably forever. Jack would need to stretch the wings that kept him alive. Perhaps Norrington had had some of his own once, because he understood, but even if it was so, they were long since withered and dry. And he would be able to let his mended pirate go - he would have no choice.

Not tonight, though, he told himself, arms locked around Jack, trapping the caged heart to beat against his chest. *Tonight, and for as long as I can, I will hold on.*

Jack was willing to let himself be clutched, but never caught, never kept – Norrington could taste it in the hidden depths of his mouth, see it in the way his eyes closed as he bent down to renew pleasures freely given. And he was so desperate to keep feeling, keep caring, that he almost didn't mind.

He was touched and caressed and whispered to and finally filled, and that was almost enough.

In Which Norrington Is Worst at Hide and Seek

“It feels as though I’ve wrenched my back,” said Norrington, rolling one shoulder experimentally.

Jack ran fingers up his ribs, firm enough not to tickle. “Don’t go blamin’ me, now.”

“And why not?” Norrington demanded. “I’ve got you at me day and night, Sparrow, I shouldn’t be surprised if it turns out to be entirely your fault.”

Raising an amused eyebrow, Jack sent a fingertip down the soft treasure trail beneath his navel. “Haven’t heard you complain about my attentions before this.” Norrington merely scowled at him and tugged at the quilt Jack was monopolizing.

Jack bit down on a sigh. There was no getting around it: Norrington was a moody bedmate. Not that Jack was a perpetual ray of sunshine, of course, but the commodore was as mercurial as the sea herself and twice less likely to share why. Questioning only resulted in getting him snubbed, so Jack had resorted to the far more effective and enjoyable method of fucking him back into a good mood.

“Been making up for lost time,” he said silkily as he thumbed a nipple into a reluctant peak. “My dry months are bad enough, but count you in and we’ve got years to work for.”

Reminding the man of his unlamented celibacy was not a good move, immediately rendering all the valuable work he was doing with his hands moot as Norrington pulled away from his touch.

“I told you,” he muttered, patting the covers down to make a little valley of space between their bodies, “my back hurts. We were up most of the night and I would very much like to spend my Sunday morning in peace, thank you.”

“Then I might wonder why you’re here in *my* bed,”Jack said under his breath, muffling his voice against a pillow.

“What was that?”

“Nothing,” he said more clearly, rolling his eyes. Truth be told, he would welcome some sleep, but he was not about to put up with this sulking for the rest of the day. He yanked firmly on both quilt and top sheet, taking them with him as he hopped off the bed.

Norrington yelped as his body was laid bare. Jack snickered as he attempted to cover himself with both hands, blushing furiously. Completely shameless in the dark, yes, but render him so beautifully naked in daylight and he tended to take it amiss.

“Up,” Jack commanded, smacking a pale hip lightly.

“Why?” Norrington said indignantly, making a grab for the stolen bedclothes and glaring daggers when Jack skipped out of the way.

He clucked as he spread the quilt on the floor. “Trust me. C’mon, up with you,” he coaxed as Norrington, still looking skeptical, swung his legs over the side of the bed.

Pulling him up, Jack said, “Lie down.”

“This is not comfortable,” Norrington complained. He did obey, however, stretching out flat on his

stomach at Jack's prodding.

Jack ignored his protests and knelt at his left side, hands hovering over his back. "Where does it hurt?"

Norrington twisted one arm behind him, gesturing at the small of his back. "Low. And straight down the center. And my shoulders –"

Jack interrupted him with a chuckle. "I truly have been rough on you, haven't I?"

"Perhaps I just slept badly," said Norrington primly.

"So one minute it's all my fault and the next I've had no effect whatsoever on your body, eh?"

"You know perfectly well what effect – Jack? What are you doing?"

Jack had gotten up and was probing between his shoulder blades with one heel. "Relax," he said to the face looking up at him in mild alarm, holding his arms out for balance.

"Are you going to *walk* on me?" Norrington wanted to know, sounding none too thrilled at the prospect.

"Yes, and if you don't hold perfectly still and do what I say, I'll accidentally break your back." Which was an exaggeration, but he appreciated the way Norrington went quiet. "Take a deep breath," he instructed, finding the right spot with his toes, "and let it out."

Norrington did so and Jack pressed his weight down, satisfied by the resounding crack and Norrington's stifled gasp.

He was still for a beat, letting his foot rest gently while Norrington breathed quietly underneath it.

"Did you...break me?" Norrington finally managed.

"Try to move," said Jack evenly. Norrington did so, fidgeting before he twisted this way and that, pleased astonishment taking over his face.

"It feels better," he marveled.

"Mmmm," said Jack, kissing the back of his neck as he dropped to his knees again. "Want more?"

"*God* yes." His moan was as heady as it had ever been in bed, and Jack grinned. He settled himself atop Norrington's hips to begin the massage in earnest. Starting at the top and working his way down, he drew out more cracks and soft, guttural noises with the heels of his hands on either side of Norrington's spine. He used each finger, his elbows, and once his chin to knead away the knots he encountered in the layer of muscle between flesh and bone. Norrington's breathing was slightly labored, his head turned to the side with his eyes closed in rapture.

"You have no idea how lovely you are like this," Jack murmured, blowing into his face. Norrington didn't move except to curl his lips into a smile, the corner of which Jack kissed as he ground his knuckles against an especially stubborn spot just above the white scar on his right side. "D'you remember the tiny scrap of a massage you gave me in the study that day? Torturous, lad, with how you made me want you."

"Were you faking?" Norrington asked, his mouth barely moving.

"The back pain? Aye, maybe a little." He brushed his eyelashes against a flushed cheek, lowering

himself back down to let Norrington feel his awakening hardness. “But turn over and I’ll show you some things which can’t be faked.”

The morning was just starting to get interesting when they were interrupted by a knock at the door. “Jack, there’s a young Mr. Turner here t’see ya.”

Jack groaned against Norrington’s thieving tongue before reluctantly pulling away. “Tell ‘im to come back later.”

“‘E’s been a bit insistent,” said Mrs. Perry just before Will’s voice joined her.

“Let me in, Jack, it’s an emergency!”

“Now look here, whelp –” Jack began before he was distracted by the struggle of trying to hold onto the legs wrapped around his waist, but Norrington managed to wriggle out from underneath him. Eyes large with panic, he clutched the quilt to himself and dove beneath the bed.

Jack got up and followed after, trying to reach him with a flailing arm, but Norrington evaded him.

“Very bright, Gabriel,” Jack hissed, a bit dizzy from straightening so quickly. “Just for that, I’m going to seduce him so's you can hear every word.”

A foot shot out to kick him in the ankle and he cursed, dragging his breeches on and grimacing as he fastened them over his neglected arousal. An untucked shirt thankfully concealed the bulge by the time Will had given up on what little tact he possessed and barged into the room.

It was immediately apparent that he was in no condition to notice the state of Jack’s breeches, or his reddened face, or the uncovered bed.

“It’s Elizabeth,” said Will urgently, pacing to the opposite end of the small room and turning back again.

Jack caught him by the upper arms, a thousand things racing through his head and none of them good. “What’s happened? Is she all right?”

Will shook his head, gazing out at Jack from a loose shank of curls. “She’s thrown me out,” he cried, his face crumpling as he fell heavily onto the bed.

Hoping he hadn’t landed on a wet spot, Jack sat down beside him. “Slow it down a little, William.” Despite Will’s great air of tragedy, he had a hard time believing such a crisis was at hand.

“It started this morning,” said Will, waving his hands artlessly around as he tried to explain. “She said she didn’t want to go to church because she was tired of waddling around among all the skinny wenches in town – her words, not mine – and I said that was fine, and I didn’t want to go either if she did not. Then she started shouting at me to go, because otherwise everyone would think we were disgraced or ashamed or something of the like – it was difficult to understand her at that point. When I asked exactly why anyone would think that, she chucked a plate at my head and told me to get out.” Finished with his tale, he flopped back onto the bed and threw his arms across his face.

Jack reclined beside him, frowning. “Doesn’t sound like our sensible Lizzie. Can't imagine her missing a clean shot like that.”

“I can’t do anything right,” Will moaned.

“Of course you can’t,” said Jack frankly. “You’re a man.”

Will raised his arms to blink at Jack in confusion. “Yes, and?”

Sighing, Jack shook his head. The boy was as clueless about the fairer sex as his father had been. “You’re trying so hard to understand what she’s going through, and in the end you just can’t. And she's no doubt missing her ma in her conditon. Push her in the direction of some fellow women – kindly ones, mind, not those catty society mavens who’ll whisper behind her back – and she’ll feel better.”

“That’s it?” said Will, looking doubtful. “That’s the reason she’s been so short with me?”

“It’s the best one I can guess at,” Jack replied.

Will sat back up and regarded him with something like awe. “How do you know these things?”

“I’ve never been accused of bein’ responsible for a babe, but I have spent some time around them. Didn’t I ever tell you about Charlotte?”

“No.” The boy spun around to face him, sitting cross-legged, always eager for a story.

Jack crossed his hands behind his head, letting a slow smile steal over his face. “I fell madly in love with Lottie when I was thirteen. She lived down the street and she couldn’t've been more than sixteen, seventeen, but she had a little boy and no husband to be seen. I used to go by and keep an eye on him sometimes when she’d have a few working girls over for tea. I spent a good deal of time with those ladies for a year or so, an’ I learned a lot about the female mind.” He smirked, studying a thumbnail. “And body.”

Will’s jaw dropped. “You did not, Jack.”

“Did too,” Jack retorted. “The precious jewel of an Irishwoman herself made sure I knew just how grateful she was for all the help. Oh, she had the prettiest blue eyes, Lottie did, and holy Christ, her *figure*...” He sketched the shape of breasts and hips in the air, smirking at the pink-faced blacksmith.

Someone coughed and it was not either of them.

Will glanced down at the bed. “What was that?”

“The cat,” said Jack smoothly.

A noise from the hallway made them both sit up straight. Elizabeth came into the room, holding her belly with both hands, her hair unbound.

Will leapt to his feet and darted to his wife’s side. “Elizabeth, you didn’t walk here, did –”

“Don’t *start*,” Elizabeth snapped. “You left me alone, Will Turner, and just before Sunday service too!”

“You said you didn’t want to go – and you *told* me to leave!”

Jack winced at their tones and quickly stepped between them. “Perhaps the both of you need a bit of time to cool off. Will, go downstairs and ask Mrs. Perry to grace you with a sample of the commodore’s fine wines –” He thought he could detect the faintest snort coming from under the bed. “– and Lizzie, you stay here an' have a chat with me.”

Elizabeth crossed her arms over her bosom and sniffed at her husband, “Perhaps that would be best.”

Will looked to the ceiling in hapless frustration before he stalked out of the bedroom.

Jack fixed Elizabeth with a stern look. “I know it’s your first child, love, but you’ve got to stop harrying the poor boy.”

Without warning, Elizabeth’s brown eyes filled with tears.

Damn, Jack thought despondently as she burst into sobs that set her body to heaving. He guided her to the bed and sat her down, biting his lip and putting an arm around her. At least this was Norrington’s shirt she was sniffling into. “There now, lass...”

“I’m *horrible*,” Elizabeth wailed, clenching her hands in the borrowed garment. “I’m horrible to Will when he has been nothing but sweet and wonderful, and I just *shout* at him like a harpy. And I’m enormous! Look at me, Jack! I’m the size of a house! I’ve never been fat in my *life*, but now I can’t see my feet. Where are my feet, Jack?” She lifted her legs, with some effort, to wiggle said feet. “I don’t know how he’s ever going to want me again after this. And I’m tired all the time, and I eat the strangest foods, and I have to use the privy every quarter of an hour, and the baby’s almost here and I’m not going to be any good at being a mother!”

Jack waited for her tirade to end, holding back the desire to laugh. Her tears faded out almost as quickly as they started.

“Feel better?” he asked, stroking damp hair back from her brow.

Elizabeth snuffled into his shoulder. “A little,” she said hoarsely. “I’m afraid, Jack.”

“Which isn’t something you’re used to, I know, but trust me when I say so’s Will.”

She shook her head. “That’s not true. Will is – he’s *Will*. He’s as solid as a rock and he will be perfectly fine.”

“So will you, darling,” Jack assured her. “The both of you together – you’ll figure things out and you’ll be the simply the most stunning set of parents in all Port Royal. Why, I’ll have to sneak into the house to take the babe away and teach it the proper way to pick pockets and swear in Dutch.”

Elizabeth giggled, starting as Ned raced into the room and under the bed. “That kitten of Gabriel’s has more energy than any creature needs.”

“You think back on that when you’re living on two hours of sleep a night,” said Jack. Elizabeth, looking more like herself, was about to make a cutting remark when they were both jolted by some kind of surge.

Carefully, one hand at her back, Elizabeth got up to peer down at the edge of the bed. Where Jack could now see a corner of quilt poking out.

She looked back at Jack, pointing imperiously at the bit of green. Jack made a face, knowing when he’d been caught, and knelt down to drag it out. Norrington came with it, blinking dust out of his eyes and holding Ned by the scruff of his neck. Jack could see a smear of blood on the web of skin between Norrington’s thumb and forefinger – one of the kitten’s favorite snacks.

Elizabeth gaped at him as he wrapped the blanket around himself, though not before a blush spread more or less over his entire body.

“Game’s up,” said Jack cheerfully, tossing himself down onto the bed. Norrington glared up at him from the floor. “What, you want me to deny it? Not even I could come up with a plausible story ‘bout how you ended up naked under my bed, sweet.”

He’d used the endearment on purpose, enjoying the way Norrington’s face turned an even brighter shade of scarlet – and very much enjoying how Norrington would probably make him pay for it once the younglings were gone.

Elizabeth was now stabbing her finger in the air at them both, a gleam of triumph in her eyes. “I *knew* it! I knew something had to be going on!”

Jack picked a bit of fluff off the bedsheet, ignoring the wounded look Norrington shot him. No sense letting the man think he'd gone about blabbing the story all over town. “You didn’t, lass, not really.”

“Well, I suspected,” said Elizabeth stridently. She pursed her lips at Norrington. “Gabriel, do get up off the floor, please.”

Not even Norrington at his most formal could deny the request of a pregnant woman whose breakdown he had just witnessed. He hopped awkwardly to his feet, trying to keep every bare inch of himself covered with the quilt. Jack was torn between a possessive desire to keep that fair skin shielded from all eyes but his own, and an equally powerful desire to show him off. He settled for slinging an arm across Norrington’s shoulders. The other immediately stiffened, though he was too busy looking mortified to move away.

Jack could see the corner of Elizabeth’s mouth twitching as she tried to keep a straight face. “No need to look so terrified. This is too lovely a secret for me to share it.”

Norrington cleared his throat as if he wanted to speak, but he couldn’t get anything out.

“Am I the only one who knows?” Elizabeth asked.

“No,” said Jack. “The illustrious Mrs. Perry keeps us in foodstuffs when we’re too occupied to leave the bedroom.”

Norrington choked beside him and flung his arm off.

“That’s it?” she said, looking vaguely disappointed.

“Ah,” said Norrington finally, looking as though he’d reached a new depth of shame. “Lieutenant Groves.” He sent a shifty glance at Jack to gauge his reaction, but Jack only shrugged. Groves had reason enough to hold his tongue.

Elizabeth tapped her chin with one hand, looking at them with narrow, calculating eyes. “I’ll not tell a soul, on one condition.”

“Name it,” said Norrington, relief evident in his voice.

“I want to see the two of you kiss.”

Norrington gaped at her. “You must be joking.”

Jack snickered. He knew Elizabeth well, and he knew when she was completely lacking in any sense of humor.

Elizabeth waved a hand at them, looking almost disinterested. “Go on. Prove to me that you’re serious about this.”

The word ‘serious’ caused Jack to instinctively balk, but he had never grown tired of being the center of attention, especially when he had such a fine partner in crime. He took advantage of Norrington’s mouth still being open in shock, holding his face so that he couldn’t move away as Jack kissed him. He made sure there was no slow lead-in, only the type of searing, all-encompassing kiss that would melt protest in Norrington’s brain before it had a chance to form. Sure enough, he found weight sagging against him and a mouth fierce under his own, allowing his intrusion while fighting for a sense of control.

When they broke apart, Norrington’s eyes were a cloudy seafoam color and Elizabeth had both hands clasped over her mouth in delight.

Jack winked at her. Let her stew on that while she was worrying about renewing Will’s interest in her body.

“Elizabeth?”

Just before he came in the door, Norrington made a desperate flight to the window, abandoning the quilt. Elizabeth tilted her head in contemplation at his nude body before he managed to wrap himself in the curtains.

Will had a newly-weeping wife in his arms before he had a chance to notice the rather large feet poking out from beneath the brocade. He looked at Jack in confusion. Jack waved him onwards as Elizabeth whispered into his ear, catching things like “dearest” and “love you” and “forgive me.”

The two of them turned and left, their heads bent close together.

After a moment Mrs. Perry poked her head in just as Norrington was peeping out from the curtains. With a strangled noise, he shrouded himself again.

Mrs. Perry gave her employer a strange look before turning to Jack. “Was that Miss Elizabeth I heard cryin’ up here?”

“Certainly wasn’t me,” he said.

The woman tsked softly. “I’ll be o’er their way sometime to give the poor child some comfort. You get him out from there, now – washin’ the sheets so bloody of’en is work enough, but I’ll be cross if I’ve got to do th’ curtains as well.”

Norrington waited until he could hear the door click shut before he emerged. “I don’t think,” he told Jack faintly, “I have ever been so embarrassed in my life.”

“Glad I could be of service,” said Jack, bowing. He squawked as he was knocked back onto the bed.

“My back’s better now,” Norrington growled, bending down to sink teeth into his neck. “And I’ve some things to say about your idea of ‘service.’”

Jack laughed and pulled him closer. “If I’d known service to the Crown might entail something like this, I would’ve have turned meself in ages ago.”

In Which There Is a New Arrival

Norrington had spent the better part of an afternoon chastising a handful of young marines who'd thought it amusing to line the seat of Lieutenant Gillette's chair with black ink. Privately he had found it to be just a little funny to see Gillette hoping around like an outraged partridge (and so had Groves), but disrespect had to be punished. At least the gentlemen had had the sense to come clean; he suspected Groves would not have taken the whole thing so lightly if no culprits readily turned themselves in.

Ned greeted him at the door, letting him drum fingers down a sloping spine. "Evening, sir. Where's Jack gotten to?" Ned flitted off without an answer, so Norrington went to check the study and the bedrooms, shedding clothing as he went so that he was down to shirt, breeches, and stockings by the time he found his quarry outside the kitchen.

The door to the garden was open and Jack was sitting on the small stone bench outside, his knees drawn up to his chin. Late afternoon sunlight filtered through the orange trees to burnish his skin a light gold, though six months ago it would have been bronze. He didn't look up when Norrington approached, smile fading from his lips as he saw the distance in the dark eyes fixed on the setting sun.

"Jack?" A light touch on his head made him start and look up. Whatever was troubling him, it was quickly masked by an easygoing grin. Norrington knew he'd get no answers from Jack tonight, only the prospect of a cold bed, so he let it go. He draped himself over the back of the bench, pressing his cheek to Jack's.

"'Ey," Jack said fondly, leaning back against him.

Turning his head, Norrington realized that the kitchen through which he'd just passed did not smell like cooking. "Isn't Mrs. Perry here? It's nearly suppertime."

"Haven't seen her all day," said Jack, pouting as Norrington pulled away from him to stand straight. He stuck out his arms to be lifted to his feet and Norrington complied, grunting when Jack slumped purposefully against him. He frowned as he half-dragged the pirate back into the house. Mrs. Perry had been out when he'd left that morning, running errands – or so he had assumed.

Jack slipped an arm around his waist and under his shirt, tickling his mustache against Norrington's neck. "No worries – I'm sure we can find something t'occupy ourselves until she gets back."

"I'm hungry," Norrington protested. Jack shoved him down into a chair and grabbed a red apple out of the basket on the table.

"Here, you whimpering babe," he said, awarding Norrington with the fruit after he'd given it a quick polish with a thankfully clean sleeve.

Feeling somewhat sulky, Norrington said, "I don't want – oh." And that was always the problem – the moment Jack touched him, he had no will for anything but touching him back.

A hand squeezed his rapidly hardening cock again, Jack's wicked smile plastered over his face. He slid to his knees without taking his eyes or his hand off of Norrington, who could only try to keep his breathing steady and stare back at him. Relief flooded him when Jack dipped his head to concentrate on undoing his laces in the near-dark, the heavy weight of his hair resting on Norrington's thigh. He held still, waiting for the hot, moist glory of that mouth to descend on him.

When it didn't, he pulled a face at Jack.

"Please..." He didn't care that his throat caught on a plea, not when Jack was looking up at him and licking his lips as though he craved Norrington's taste like an opiate.

"The apple, Gabriel," Jack murmured, flicking his tongue out to come so close to the tip of Norrington's cock that he could feel the displaced air. No blood, there was no blood in his brain at all... "A bite," Jack was saying, "take a bite of it."

He glanced dumbly at the apple in his hand, bruising from the force of his grip. Raising it uncertainly to his mouth, he waited for Jack to nod before he sank his teeth into it.

Norrington had always loved apples: the shine of the skin, the crisp scent, the way the meat of the fruit gave only when you applied sufficient pressure with teeth and gums. He knew Jack preferred oranges, liked to suck all the juices and spit out the pulp, but from the way his pupils dilated when Norrington bit into his apple, they might soon share a favorite fruit.

The apple was lush from being squeezed so hard and its juice dribbled down his chin. Jack made a noise like he'd been pinched and caught Norrington's hands, keeping him from wiping it away. He grabbed onto Norrington's neck and pulled himself up to lick the errant juice, catching it just before it dripped onto his shirt. Norrington opened his mouth under Jack's insistent tongue, which sought out every trace of tart and brought with it the citrus sweet of oranges.

He was never going to be able to eat fruit without blushing again, that was for damned sure.

Managing to keep himself from melting off the chair when Jack made his way back down, Norrington took no chances this time and laced his fingers though Jack's hair, miraculously avoiding getting stabbed with anything sharp. He needed no directing, however, bending over Norrington to take him deep with a soft pleased moan. Norrington cried out at the intensity – the juice of the apple stung faintly – but the sensations were cut short once again, albeit not so drastically. Jack's lips slid back down his shaft until he was just teasing the head, licking at it mockingly.

"Jack," Norrington said, feeling as though his voice would crack, "if you want any of this to be reciprocated, you'd better start..." He paused, scarcely believing he was saying this out loud. "Start sucking."

The black eyes flashed in amusement and renewed desire, but he kept his mouth closed, his lips puckering a kiss against Norrington's pulsing cock. And at once Norrington understood.

He took another bite of the apple.

Jack sucked him down again, working his throat and doing marvelous things with his tongue. His hands came up to lavish attention on Norrington's balls, squeezing and stroking and rolling sensitive flesh in elegant fingers. The feverish swell of pleasure distracted him from Jack's own needs, so that he was shocked when Jack pulled off and planted himself firmly in Norrington's lap. The apple got knocked out of his hand as Jack launched an attack on his mouth, bringing a taste familiar and vaguely like saltwater with him this time, meeting the last traces of apple to join them both in a bittersweet flavor he found both apropos and intoxicating.

Jack's erection was sliding against his own, his breeches having gone missing at some point, but that contact too was abruptly denied him. What the devil was wrong with –

"Cooking oil," Jack hissed out between clenched teeth, flinging things out of the pantry until he

came up with the large tin. He used a dazed Norrington's shoulders to lever himself up on the table and then it all made sense. Norrington pressed him down, ran hands up the legs wrapping around his waist.

Watching him hungrily as he fumbled with the lid, Jack panted, "Had a mind to pound you boneless tonight, but 'm afraid you'd break the table."

"Are you calling me fat?" Norrington demanded, stroking the cool oil onto himself with trembling hands.

"'Course not," said Jack, wriggling as Norrington shoved a couple of fingers into him. "But y'are a – oooh yes, very nice – quite a sturdy boy, there, Gabriel."

"Sturdy," Norrington repeated breathlessly, thrusting forward – oh God –

Jack's eyes rolled back in his head as he tightened his thighs and his internal muscles. "Blazes – yeah, sturdy...strapping, one might even say...c'mon and *fuck* me..."

"If you'd stop – chattering –" Norrington managed before he adjusted to the tricky angle and drove into him properly. The table shot back a few inches and they both wobbled, Jack balanced on the edge and Norrington trying desperately not to fall. When they steadied themselves again, Jack burst out laughing.

"Do it again, we're nearly to the wall," he said, stopping mid-chuckle as Norrington obeyed, stepping forward along with the movement of the table until it hit the wall. A moment of adjustment and he was thrusting again, hands braced on the table, Jack whipping his head back and groaning wordlessly. His back was going to be murder tomorrow, he reflected distantly. Jack distracted him from his rather arbitrary thoughts by unclenching one hand from Norrington's bicep to stroke himself in time with the quickening pace, since there was no chance of Norrington risking his precarious balance by doing so.

He had to think when he was doing this, had to concentrate even while he lost himself in the way Jack moved beneath him, because in those moments it was too easy to believe. Jack was too needy, too raw – Norrington was afraid that he'd make any sort of promise if he was asked. And he feared that in some dark moment he *would* ask, that he'd fall for the way Jack clutched at him, the way that said he didn't ever want to leave – the pretty lie given and taken when ecstasy overtook any desire for honesty. He didn't want it to come to that.

But he did want it to come to this: Jack suddenly tensing, gripping Norrington's shoulder to pull himself up as his face contorted and he breathed out Norrington's name. For all his noise and bluster, he rarely spoke above a whisper in that final moment, hardly ever said anything but a quiet, wondering, "Gabriel." His eyes flickered open almost as an afterthought and Norrington held his gaze as he let go into tight heat and molten flesh and Jack – "Jack – Jack...", his own release accompanied by an undignified shout.

To his sorrow, he had to slide out almost immediately if he wanted to fall forward atop Jack's body, both swift motions provoking an "Oof" from the other man. Jack's legs dropped back down on either side of him – and now he knew where such muscles came from. Jack could probably do this standing up. Norrington would have to mention it when he wasn't so completely undone.

Jack spider-walked fingers up and down his back, dropping a kiss onto his cheek. "I swear, you get better and better at that."

Norrington grunted in thanks, mouthing the sweat from Jack's neck.

“I meant it about the table, though,” said Jack, smacking him between the shoulder blades. “I know you like a good cuddle, but shove off, eh?”

With a sigh, Norrington eased himself up, feeling the table creaking dangerously beneath him. A mumbled curse greeted his ears as he helped Jack to his feet, and a cold thread of worry struck him. “I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

Jack smiled at him and shook his head. “No more’n I asked you to. I’m tired, though, and I’d like to see a bed before I collapse.”

“You’ll get no arguments from me,” said Norrington with feeling, pressing a hand to the small of his back. “Aunt Rose always said I’d meet my death chasing after pirates, but I never expected it to happen this literally.”

The sound of a door closing at the front of the house sent them both scrambling for discarded breeches and a cloth to clean off Jack’s belly. They were mildly presentable by the time Mrs. Perry came in, though still flushed and shaky on their feet.

She took one look at them and rolled her eyes.

Norrington brushed a hand across his flaming cheeks. “Good evening, madam.”

“‘M terrible sorry, sir, but Miss Eliz’beth’s time came this mornin’ and I went to make m’self useful.”

Jack grabbed her by the arm, his eyebrows shooting up. “Lizzie’s had her baby? Is she all right? Is it healthy? Did Will faint? What is it, girl or boy?”

Mrs. Perry shooed him. “Calm down, man, I cain’t think wiv ye prattling on!” Norrington nodded sympathetically, nearly as eager as Jack to hear the news.

“It’s a lovely li’l girl,” said Mrs. Perry, beaming proudly. “Both’re doin’ just fine, and the papa’d fallen asleep in the babe’s rockin’ chair last I seen him.”

The expression taking over Jack’s face was a sight to see, one that made a smile touch Norrington’s own lips. He let it stretch and widen when Jack looked at him.

“C’n one o’ you boys tell me why the table’s all shoved up ‘gainst the wall?” asked Mrs. Perry, planting fists on her hips with a sudden air of menace.

Jack and Norrington both took a step back. Norrington merely shook his head when Jack looked at him, speechless with chagrin.

“You might want to give it a good scrub, love,” he said with a cheeky wink at Mrs. Perry, before Norrington pulled him along as he fled the room.

They scrambled up the stairs to the sounds of a despondent “Ye didn’t! Not on me *table*!”

Norrington’s bedchamber was closer to the stairwell so it was there they ducked in, Jack sprawling across the bed and Norrington following at a more sedate pace.

“A girl,” said Jack with a smile and a disbelieving full-body shake that set his hair to twinkling. “A sweet wee lass – the third generation of Turner I’ll have held in me arms.” He rose to his knees, tugging on the hem of Norrington’s shirt. “Can’t we go see them now?”

Norrington laughed quietly, stripping his rumpled clothing. “I think we ought to give them a couple of days at least, Jack.”

Jack hummed a quiet tune as he got undressed himself, so lost in his thoughts that he became tangled in his shirt and Norrington had to help extract him from it. He curled up in Norrington’s arms, for once not fighting for space or control of the blanket.

“You know what?” Jack said drowsily, pressing his thumb to the inside of Norrington’s elbow.

“Hmmm?” It was barely past dusk, but the incident in the kitchen had exhausted him and he would really have preferred that Jack be quiet.

“I knew,” said Jack with perfect conviction. “Knew it was goin’ to be a girl. Had a dream.” He turned into Norrington’s side and Norrington was suddenly wide awake as he was hit by a realization that made him gasp. Why it was prompted at this particular moment, he wasn’t sure, but it was sudden and undeniable.

He was in love with Jack Sparrow.

He blinked rapidly, trying to clear the burst of stars from his vision.

“Gabriel?” Jack took his face in both hands and tilted his head to one side, then the other. “Got somethin’ in your eye?”

Norrington stared at him for a few seconds before he said slowly, “No...no, I’m fine.”

Nothing had changed between his last thought and this one, and yet even the ceiling looked different.

“Mmph,” said Jack, satisfied with this answer. “Sleep then.” He burrowed under the coverlet, sliding down and then up Norrington’s side before falling still with a sigh. Norrington touched his face with, he felt, remarkably steady hands considering that his entire world had just been shaken on its axis. Jack murmured appreciatively at the attention, his breathing drawing out even and deep. He was asleep before Norrington could open his mouth to say – to say what?

To tell him. Of course he would have to tell him.

He tried it out in his mind as Jack snorted in his sleep.

I love you, Jack.

Four little words, three if he left off the name. That wasn’t so difficult. He could cry them to the heavens as he spent himself in Jack’s mouth or his body or his hand. He could whisper them into the golden shell of an ear just as Jack was waking up. He could say them over dinner, or while they were teasing Ned with bits of twine, or he could even write them in a letter and leave it on the pillow for Jack to find – no, that last one was cowardly, he would have to actually speak aloud.

The more he thought of it, the less daunting the prospect became. He wasn’t sure what Jack would do once he said it, but that didn’t matter. It would work itself out somehow. It had to, because he was in love and he still believed that carried some kind of weight in the universe, a weight that sex on a kitchen table would never have, no matter how good it might be. Somehow, somehow he’d be able to keep the bird he’d sheltered, once Jack knew about this. The timing had to be right, though, had to be perfect – everything might depend on the timing.

Jack mumbled something about a pony and pinking shears. Norrington gently stroked the scars on

his left forearm and fell asleep feeling that his mind had been restored to order and a great burden taken from it.

In Which There Is a Midnight Swim

Once again, Jack couldn't sleep.

He lay on his back, studying the ceiling. Closing his eyes, he tried to see the beams of his cabin on the *Pearl* above him, closer than this one and made of dark, unpainted oak. The memory wasn't very clear, however, as he didn't usually spend a great deal of time studying his own ceiling, so he soon gave up.

His thoughts turned to the newest arrival in Port Royal, which was an infinitely more interesting topic. He and Norrington had been to visit the Turners today, greeting an exhausted Elizabeth, a thunderstruck Will, and a tiny black-haired creature with all ten toes and all ten fingers, safe and healthy. They had called her Morgan, which Elizabeth swore was an old family name. Jack suspected otherwise. In any case, Sir Henry couldn't have been prouder to have such a pretty little girl bearing his name.

It had amused Jack to no end to watch Norrington panic when Elizabeth gently laid the babe in his arms. She had started wailing and he'd turned white, immediately giving her back. She'd cried when Jack first held her, too, but Jack had arrived with the intention of making that child fall madly in love with him. He had cooed to her and dangled some of the beads in his hair, and after a few minutes it seemed as though Morgan had inherited her mother's fascination with pirates. He'd kept her until she got a suspiciously pleased look on her face and warmth began to soak through her swaddling clothes, at which point he'd hastily handed her back to her mother. Babies were all well and good, but there were some things he was not going to deal with unless it was absolutely necessary.

Norrington shifted beside him and sighed. "Jack. Go to sleep." He pulled Jack into his arms, stroking his hair. Jack wriggled closer to him. He'd met Bill's granddaughter today and nothing could have made him more content – and yet here was this lovely long-limbed man in his bed, not just icing on the cake but an entire spun-sugar fairy castle.

Jack squinched his face up against Norrington's chest. The commodore did not keep enough sweets in his house and it was a travesty.

"Sorry," he murmured, just to have something to interrupt his internal musings. "I know you have to work in the morning. If'm bothering you, you should go back to your room."

"That isn't what I meant," said Norrington. He sounded a little hurt and Jack turned to him, kissing him slowly and lazily. Norrington had relaxed by the time he finished.

"You really do hate it here, don't you?" His voice was small and shy, odd for a man who'd seen Jack at his most uninhibited, the most recent incidence being just a few hours ago. And heavens knew Jack had reduced him to a state of incoherence more times than he could count. Perhaps it was lingering awkwardness from the afternoon with the Turners, in which Norrington had struggled mightily to pretend that what was going on between them was not, in fact, going on. Jack hadn't bothered; Elizabeth already knew, and Will was so deliriously happy that pirate could've ravished commodore right in front of him and the boy wouldn't have noticed a thing. His little touches and assaults of bedroom eyes had left Norrington sitting stiffly beside him, glowering with irritation. It was still such *fun* to drive him mad.

Jack realized that he hadn't answered the question. He thought a moment longer; he had already offended Norrington once tonight, albeit unintentionally, and he didn't mean to do it again.

“It feels...like a cage,” he finally said, trying to sketch an illustration in the air with one hand. “All these solid walls around me, they make it hard to breathe. I can ignore it most of the time, but there’s moments when it presses down like a weight. I need...” He paused, heaving a sigh against the hand caressing his cheek. “I miss the sea.”

Norrington sat up suddenly and started to dress. Jack rolled his eyes, wondering what he could possibly have done now.

“Let’s go,” said Norringon briskly, pulling on his breeches and tossing Jack’s discarded clothing at him.

“Where might we be going?” Jack asked, mystified.

Norrington turned around to look at him. His smile was just barely visible out of the bedroom’s shadows. “We’re going for a swim.”

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“I’m not sure it’s healthy for you, actually –”

“This was *your* idea!”

“Yes,” said Norrington, looking out at the small cove a half-mile away from his home, “but often my ideas are quite bad. I’ve no aptitude for spontaneity.”

Jack began to rapidly strip off his clothing. “Well, here’s your chance to remedy that.” He tugged at his breeches and Norrington gasped in shock.

“We’re outside!”

“Excuse me, Commodore, but the words ‘let’s go for a swim’ are ringing too loudly in my ears for me to hear your feeble protests.”

“I didn’t mean a *naked* swim!” Norrington hissed. “Anyone could see us!”

Kicking his clothes aside, Jack swept a hand around the deserted beach. “Gabriel, there is absolutely no one here. *No one here*!” he shouted to the empty air, making Norrington flinch.

He dipped the toes of one foot in the gentle lap of water against the sand, wiggling them happily. “Perfect,” he pronounced, and proceeded to wade out. He got to where the water was to his knees and flopped forward, submerging himself in the shallow water. It was cool but not cold, and silky in that way totally unique to saltwater. Jack fluttered his limbs in contentment; he had missed just the sensation of being cradled by the ocean. She was his mistress as much as the *Pearl* and no bathtub could imitate her touch, even with a playful commodore in it to make waves.

Norrington, he saw, was still glancing around anxiously. Jack sighed and splashed him, catching him square on the pristine white breeches and hose he’d pulled on. Norrington jumped out of range with a shout, brushing at his soiled clothing and glaring at Jack.

Jack floated on his back and spat a stream of water into the air.

“You’re all wet now,” he said. “You might as well.” When Norrington still hesitated, he began backstroking out further. “You know,” he called innocently, “I’m feeling a little weakened here. If you don’t swim out and join me, I might drown.”
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“It would be an improvement for this island, though I doubt the sealife would thank me for allowing it,” Norrington retorted, but he began tugging off his shoes all the same. Jack tread water idly and enjoyed the show. By the time Norrington reached him, he had a boyish smile on his face.

Floating again, Jack said smugly, “See now, was that so hard?” Norrington dunked him in response, his hands pushing down on Jack’s belly until he folded in two.

“What was tha’ for?!” Jack spluttered as he came up, lobbing a wall of water at Norrington.

He laughed and returned the splash. “Well, you said you were in danger of drowning, I only wanted to see if you were serious.”

Jack dove under the water and swam in a circle around Norrington, listening as his chuckles slowly faded away. After a pause, he could make out Norrington’s increasingly frantic calls.

“Jack? *Jack*! This isn’t funny! Sparrow!”

When the burning in his lungs became too much to bear, Jack grabbed Norrington’s arms and yanked him below the surface, slowly enough that he had time to take a breath first. Then he stole that breath from him in a kiss.

Upon resurfacing, they immediately engaged in a silent and furious splashing battle. After a few minutes Norrington gave in, no doubt because the one of them that had been deathly ill was beginning to tire. Jack could feel it in his bones, although he’d never admit to it, and Norrington knew his body well enough by now to be able to tell. Still, in Jack’s opinion, a victory was a victory. He also caught himself giggling and was appalled. Captain Jack Sparrow did not giggle. He might laugh, he might snicker, he might even indulge in the occasional cackle or guffaw, but he did not giggle. The same went for Commodore Gabriel Norrington and yet there they were, romping about a deserted Jamaican beach in the middle of the night and giggling until they had barely enough energy to tread water.

Jack didn’t spend a great deal of time pondering his lot in life. Luck or none, fate or no, you got what you got, you went from there, and it was a waste of time to measure out worth on some universal scale. Still, there were the few occasions he would pause to appreciate, wondering what he’d done to deserve such a turn but not really caring because the important thing was that he’d gotten it. And Jack had gotten Norrington, gotten him well and truly, and he was glad.

Presently Norrington suggested they head in. Jack refused, even though his recuperating muscles were rubbery with exhaustion, in the hopes that Norrington would insist on manhandling him back to shore. He was not disappointed, though Norrington complained about hauling his dead weight all the way back. They collapsed on dry land next to the neat pile Norrington had made of their clothing, lying side by side with their arms just barely touching, gazing up at the stars.

“Dark tonight,” Norrington murmured. “Moon’s behind the clouds.”

“See, there you go again,” said Jack, rolling his eyes. “We’re having this nice moment and you have to complain. Tell me that this isn’t the most beautiful night you’ve ever seen. Tell me you don’t feel part of somethin’ larger, even if that something’s just you and me.”

Norrington’s only reply was to turn his head to look at Jack, so close that Jack could feel his warm breath. He was always warm, giving off heat like a brazier, compelling Jack to stick close to his body even when he wasn’t interested in wrangling those sweet moans and cries from it. The stare made him a bit uncomfortable, though, so he kept his gaze on the sky, taking Norrington’s left hand in his right and tracing imaginary constellations in the sky with a long forefinger. “Think of

where you'd be if you were living in England right now. It'd be so dull and – and ordinary."

"I'd probably be married," said Norrington thoughtfully.

"In a great white mansion, with eight little bratlings running through the halls."

Norrington laughed. "I'm only thirty. This rhetorical incarnation of me must be a busy man."

"You married young," said Jack sagely. "And there was a set of twins."

"Ah, that explains it." He rested his forehead against Jack's cheek, kissing his shoulder. "And you, where would you be if you weren't here?"

Jack shrugged, the movement knocking Norrington's lips against his skin again. "Dunno. Probably dead, if I grew to a man in the same place I was a boy. Might have made it out, except where would I go beyond the docks? Docks are where the boats go, and sailin's all I ever wanted to do, so I never wanted to leave the docks – at least not by way of land."

"Really? You knew when you were young?"

"Aye, I always knew the sea was in my blood. I'd ask you, judging by your line of work, didn't you know it too?"

Norrington stiffened just slightly. "I joined the Navy to please my father."

Jack craned his neck to stare at him incredulously. "But you never felt that desire to cross the great blue – to find out what was beyond the horizon? To make the world your own?" All the things he'd seen in Norrington's arms – the heights he'd reached – he had just assumed that he'd found a kindred soul, buried though it was beneath brocade and duty.

"No," said Norrington softly. "I never felt it. Not then. But now...now I feel it when I look at you, and sometimes even when I'm alone, when I was on the *Dauntless* this last cruise - the freedom you crave." His words came out in a breathless tangle and Jack knew he'd spent some time thinking about them. "I touch you and I feel it because you feel it. And I think that...that I'll feel it forever now. Because of you."

Jack's eyes drifted back to the stars. His body was still, but blind panic was ringing through his every nerve.

Norrington was leaning over him, fingertips gentle against his jaw. "Jack?"

He was about to say the words neither of them could possibly allow him to say – Jack knew it was so, with a certainty that frightened him. He put a hand to the back of Norrington's head and kissed him deeply, rolling over and pressing him down into the sand, hoping fervently that the moment and the danger would pass. When their lips broke apart, something in Norrington was different. Although his voice as he said, "You're shivering, are you chilled? We'd better get back," was exactly the same, Jack knew that he had changed on some fundamental level, and that it had been Jack who'd forced him to it, in that moment when he had not let him speak.

The words 'I'm sorry' came quick to his tongue, but he bit them back, allowing Norrington to pull him to his feet. They dressed in silence and returned to the house the same way they'd walked down, clinging close enough to trip over one another's feet, before falling together into Norrington's bed.

And Jack knew that not only had he lost something that night on the beach, he'd actually thrown it

away. He would not let himself mourn it. There was no room for regret in the lives of pirates, but it was doubly true for pirates who were foolish enough to fall in love when they knew better.

In Which Things Fall Apart

He woke in the small hours of the morning, when the sky was no longer pin-pricked black velvet but not yet soaked in the rose and pale blues brought by sunrise. Instead it was a dull gray, like unpolished gunmetal, like the London skyline just before it rained.

Jack's skin was nearly colorless in this light. In sleep he looked unformed, neither the silk-tongued wraith moving with him in shades of night and moonlight and desire, nor the roguish fool who'd tumbled him down with laughter time and again. He was not the pirate unconsciously checking every entrance and exit when he came into a room, the sallow-skinned invalid asking for water, the unwavering friend consoling a frightened young couple, the surprise of a romantic gifting him with a new pet. He was only a man, breathing deeply and sighing now and then as he slept with an arm about Norrington's waist.

But on the beach he had been more. In the star-sparkled waters he had slipped away and back again, until Norrington was not sure if he was being met as an equal in element or if Jack was merely letting himself be caught. He'd chosen, wisely or no, to believe the first. Jack was pulling him in, pulling him under, and for once he'd followed with his arms outstretched -- reaching, grasping -- and his eyes closed.

Trusting a man who by definition could not be trusted, because his heart was not his own. Norrington had seen that last night, engaged in mock battle with Jack as the waves brought them near and pulled them apart again. There was no reason to resent him, but there was an ocean of reasons for sorrow. The Turners' child had been born and Jack had no further reason to stay.

He turned onto his side, brushing fingertips against the lips he'd kissed so many times that they melted against him in his dreams. Jack didn't stir.

"I wish I could keep you," he whispered, stroking the knobby back of Jack's hand on his ribs. "I wish we could be enough for each other."

Eyelashes nearly as long and lush as a woman's quivered open, unveiling dark eyes fuzzy with sleep. "Wha'?"

"Nothing," Norrington said. "I was thinking about wishes. Go back to sleep."

Jack brought his arms in close to his body and tucked his head under Norrington's chin. "'F wishes were ships."

"I thought they were supposed to be horses?"

Jack shook his head with sleepy confidence, nestling against him. "Nah. Ships."

Norrington supposed he was right. Things would be so much easier if wishes were horses rather than ships.

He left Jack snoring softly, rolled over into the warm spot and the pillow smelling of commodore. The thought of going to work made something ache behind his eyes, but that was what he had, wasn't it? That was what he would be left with, so he might as well get readjusted to the concept.

In a way the neat order and precision of proceedings at the fort became a relief, as long as he didn't think too much on what awaited him at home. He signed papers, read dispatches, and tried to feel useful to the world. When Gillette came by with a report that a local tavern owner was running an

illegal gambling ring and possibly involved in smuggling, he was eager to snatch up his coat and walk through town to investigate.

The man's wife met them at the bar, looking more and more guilty as they questioned her until she let them into a back room. Barnes the suspect was there, as were a few men of low status and a pretty blond barmaid trying to coax a recalcitrant man into letting her sit in his lap. She screamed when they barged in, but Norrington was staring at the object of her flirtation, blood rushing so quickly through his head that he scarcely heard a thing.

Jack's eyes were shadowed in the low-burning candlelight of the hidden den, but Norrington thought he saw a wince in them. Other than that, Jack did not move.

The noise of mingled outrage and triumph came from beside him. Gillette cocked his pistol at Jack's head.

"Why on earth would you come back here, Sparrow?" he snapped.

Jack didn't take his eyes away from Norrington. They asked for nothing. They admitted nothing. "Well, I had such a lovely stay last time, Mr. Gillette, and I thought to further extend my tour of your little town's amenities."

Cold was pouring down his spine as surely as if a bucket of ice water had been upended over his head. He had to flex his fingers to ease the numbness.

"Sir?" Gillette was saying. He sounded very far away. "Shall I arrest this man?" His tone indicated that he thought the pirate was anything but.

He had to swallow several times, tasting thick bile at the back of his throat, before he could answer. "Yes." His voice, to his own distant surprise, was steady.

Jack did not try to run or reach for the weapons he was now carrying. He held his hands out exactly as he had done once before, an offering made to Norrington rather than to the men who were actually cuffing him. His arms were twisted around behind his back, but he did not flinch at the sharp pulls on his shoulders.

It was an effort of sheer will to turn away from that immobile gaze to deal with the tavern owner, but Norrington managed it, feeling Jack's eyes bore through him. In minutes the culprits were secured. Jack was the first marched out, Gillette pulling him by the elbow.

He looked away as he passed Norrington, but it was not a rebuke. His eyes simply moved with his body when it was turned, leaving Norrington to stare at the back of his head.

Giving instructions to take the prisoners to the jail, he left his men to duck behind a corner and vomit into a pig trough.

In Which There Is a Cunning Plan

“You chose quite a day to pretend to be ill.”

Groves glanced up at Gillette, who was shedding his coat with a smile. Less concerned with what put it there than with the way it made his eyes crinkle, it took Groves a moment to register his words. “Did I?”

Gillette nodded as the wig, cravat, and shoes went the way of the coat, tossed onto a chair in the corner. He lowered himself over his fellow lieutenant, kissing him at the V of his shirt. “We caught Barnes in the middle of his operation, and would you guess who was sitting at his very table?”

“The pope?” Groves latched onto Gillette's hips and nipped at his ear.

A pleased shudder went through the other man. “None other than Captain Jack Sparrow.” He sat up to pull his shirt over his head, so he didn’t notice right away that Groves had gone still.

“What?” he asked, eyes wide.

“Didn’t even put up a fight,” said Gillette smugly. “I threw him into the cell myself.” He paused with the shirt clenched in his hands, staring at a pale-faced Groves. "Theo?"

Groves ran a hand through his dark hair, exhaling slowly. “Poor Gabriel,” he murmured.

Blinking quizzically, Gillette replied, “What on earth are you talking about? He’s been after Sparrow since his last escape!”

“Andrew...” Groves hesitated, wrinkling his nose at the headache this was likely going to bring on. “I have something to tell you.” Gillette opened his mouth to speak and it was immediately covered by a broad palm. “But first I want you to remember that you love me, and promise you aren’t going to shout...”

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Will’s concentrated pacing was interrupted by the slamming of the door. “We are no longer speaking to my father,” Elizabeth called through the hall.

“He wouldn’t listen to you?”

She rubbed a hand across her brow, mouth twisting bitterly. “Oh, he listened. He listened until I started to lose my voice and we were both in tears. But he won’t do a thing.”

Will brought her into his arms, dropping his chin down on her head. “Don’t be angry with him. We didn’t expect him to be able to help.”

Elizabeth squared her shoulders and smiled slightly. “I did, however, pick up a couple of strays we might find useful.”

Behind her, a plain-clothed Lieutenant Groves came in, biting his lips nervously. He was closely followed by Lieutenant Gillette, who was an alarming shade of pink. The first thing Will did was blink in surprise. He’d never spoken with Groves, but it was a well-known fact that Gillette and Elizabeth despised each other. Something about mermaids was all he’d ever been able to deduce from the dark muttering she hid behind her fan whenever they passed him in the street.
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Then he remembered that they were Norrington's men and the muscles of his jaw clenched. "What are *they* doing here?"

"We're here to help," said Groves quietly.

Will took up his pacing again. "Help with what? There's nothing to help with. We're not planning anything. Why would we be planning?"

Elizabeth shut her eyes. "Please calm down, Will."

"I will not calm down!" Will paused to stab a finger in the direction of the lieutenants. "They're *his* and they're in our home
–"

Before she got the chance to argue, they were interrupted by a tremulous call of "Hello?"

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Elizabeth had never seen someone go into shock before, but she thought it must look something like Norrington did as he staggered through the door. He was pale and shaking, resembling more than anything the way Jack had looked when they'd brought him home at the onset of his illness. His eyes ran over each of them in an unfocused manner, seeming not to register anything.

Beside her, Will started forward and she grabbed him by the arm, aware of the righteous fury coursing through him. "Don't, Will!"

"What have you done?" Will hissed at Norrington, glaring at Groves and Gillette too as they hesitantly stepped forward. Their urge to protect their commander was obvious, but the way he seemed to look through everything must have unnerved them as badly as it did her. Instead they started shouting at Will, who was only too happy to respond in kind.

"Look at him, can't you see he's got nothing to –"

"How dare you speak to the commodore so!"

"I have the right to close my own door to –"

Elizabeth sidled out between them as they closed in, making a soft sound of alarm. Norrington had quite suddenly sat down on the ground, his elbows propped on his knees and the heels of his hands pressed against his eyes. As she knelt down beside him, she saw that he wasn't weeping, but he was taking shallow, sharp breaths as though his chest would implode.

"Oh, Gabriel," she murmured, putting her arms around his rigid torso and drawing his head onto her shoulder. Two months ago she would have been uneasy attempting to comfort him, but a squalling infant had greatly improved her ability to rock anyone quiet. "Hush, it will be all right..."

Gradually the raised voices at her back faded away until the only sound was Norrington's ragged breathing and the uncomfortable foot-shifting of the other men. Ignoring them, she took him by the arm and started to rise to her feet. Norrington followed her seemingly without thinking, still hiding his face.

"We'll go upstairs for a moment, how does that sound?" she said soothingly, holding tight to him for fear that he would stumble into the wall if she turned him loose. She caught a glimpse of the faces of the others as she led Norrington past. Groves was solemn, while Gillette and Will, though still shooting suspicious glares at one another, looked grudgingly contrite. Will met her eyes as she
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looked at him, an earnest question in the way he bit his lip. She smiled to reassure him and waited as Norrington paused to negotiate the stairs.

She took him to the nursery, where Estrella was tidying around Morgan's cradle. A quick word sent her scurrying out, casting wide, curious eyes at Norrington.

Will could barely fit in the narrow rocking chair and Norrington in his uniform was an even tighter squeeze, but they managed. He bent where she nudged him and dropped down into the chair, looking mildly startled when it moved to and fro beneath him.

He was an absolute wreck and she wasn't sure how to begin putting him back together, if she could do so at all. When it came right down to it, they didn't know each other very well. Their courtship had been short and the tenuous friendship following it strained. She'd trusted him with Jack's life but she did not trust herself to say the things that would put a stop to his trembling.

She would try, though – for his sake and for Jack's, she would try her damnedest.

"Please look at me, Gabriel." Kneeling before him, she took his hands in her own, rubbing warmth into them. The shame and anguish in his green eyes tore her heart when he lifted his gaze from his lap. "I know it wasn't your fault."

"How? How do you know?" His voice was a hollow shell.

"Because of the way you look at him," she said simply. "Because you love him."

He shuddered at that. She lifted a hand to his face, running her thumb along his cheekbone and straightening his wig ever so slightly. The baby began to whimper and Norrington jumped, looking over at the crib. Elizabeth stood, wincing at the creak in her knees, and picked up a fussing Morgan. Norrington's eyes followed her as she made a slow circuit of the room until the cries softened and faded out. When she got back to the chair, he seemed calmer, his face clearer.

"Jack said he knew you were going to have a daughter," he said.

Remembering that he'd been frightened of the baby before and having a sudden, inexplicable hunch, she asked, "Would you hold her for a moment?"

Norrington's brow creased, but he allowed her to settle Morgan gently in his arms. Morgan squinched her mouth up in a frown but stayed quiet, her brown eyes intent on his face. He let out a long, slow breath and relaxed further.

Elizabeth suddenly remembered why she'd thought to hand him the baby. Will had told her a story about how Jack had gotten supremely drunk the night before their wedding. He'd been sent outside to feed Diego and it had seemed to sober him up. She was momentarily disturbed that she had just compared her offspring to a donkey, but if it worked, she wasn't going to fret.

He looked up at her suddenly, his eyes bright with what looked like worry. "Why are you doing this?" he asked hoarsely. "Why are you being kind to me?"

She smiled at him, reaching out to stroke her daughter's soft cheek. Morgan was trying gallantly to stay awake in order to stare at her new companion, but her eyes were beginning to close. "You're family now, as much as Jack is. And I ought to still be repentant for breaking your heart – although I have to say, you've recovered quite nicely."

The look on his face said that he was not going to forget those words, even as the mention of Jack caused something to flare and burn in his eyes.

“Stay up here for as long as you like. Will you put the baby back to bed before you come down?”

Norrington nodded, catching her hand as she turned away. “Thank you.” Sincerity made his voice quaver. She leaned down to swiftly kiss his cheek.

To her relief, the men had become civil enough to sit in the den, though Will’s left leg was jiggling nervously.

“Is he all right?” Gillette asked anxiously. His concern for Norrington raised his esteem in her eyes, though she would never have admitted it to his face.

“He’s watching the baby,” she answered, leaning against Will and pressing his restless knee down with the palm of her hand. “Has everything been worked out between the three of you?”

“You could have told me,” Will muttered. Elizabeth caught Gillette shooting Groves a similarly sulky look and she had to bite down on a sudden giggle. No wonder Norrington had felt comfortable confiding in them – or at least in the less nervy one.

“We can have this argument later,” she said firmly. “Right now, we have a rescue to plan.”

“It’s not going to be easy,” Groves broke in.

Will shook his head. “Apparently Norrington received an extremely virulent letter from a prominent admiral last time Jack was scheduled to hang.”

“It was ill-mannered,” said Gillette, crossing his arms over his chest. “A threat, more or less, stemming from a personal grudge. Releasing Sparrow would be grounds for a court martial.”

Elizabeth chewed on her lower lip. “My father must have been aware of it.”

“And there are the new rules to remember: no public executions of notorious criminals,” Groves added with a polite nod at Will, who grimaced. “The gallows will be heavily guarded. There’s little chance of you or his crew getting close, even if we were to help you.”

“It will have to be an inside job.”

All four of them looked up at once as Norrington came into the room, still pallid but with a new gleam of purpose in his eye.

“Yes, but that would only confound our problems,” Groves argued. “We’d be stuck with a conspirator and a condemned pirate –”

“You mean to get him out yourself,” said Will, looking at Norrington sharply. The other man nodded, sitting down in the last remaining empty chair. He looked weary and resolute.

“I would not ask it of any of you,” he said, avoiding their eyes.

Gillette was staring at him, his mouth open in shock. “But sir – even if you can get him safely away –”

“When I do,” Norrington corrected gently, “I shall – how did you once put it, Mr. Turner? – accept the consequences of my actions.”

Elizabeth looked at Will beside her. His eyes were fixed on Norrington. They understood each other better than she would ever understand either of them. Her hand crept over her husband’s and tightened.

Groves was shaking his head. “There has to be another way –” he insisted.

“I’ve allowed you both to second-guess my choices in the past,” said Norrington with a raised eyebrow. “I would not suggest trying it now.”

The two lieutenants exchanged unreadable glances before they both looked down in compliance. The chill she felt rattled her bones.

“Gabriel –”

“It’s as good as done,” he said, staring at the wall.

“Actually,” she snapped, angered at his fatalism, “we’d have to have an legitimate plan for that to be true.”

“We need help,” Will clarified. His eyes narrowed for a moment. “Didn’t you say that the other men you took today denied Jack’s involvement in the gambling scam?”

“Yes,” said Gillette, cracking the knuckles on his left hand. “They all swore he’d never been in before today, and that he was just looking for a drink and an honest hand.”

Elizabeth’s eyes went to Groves, who was looking like he was on the same wavelength that had made Will sit up very straight. “Isn’t that interesting?” he said slowly.

“Well, Jack’s never robbed anybody in this town, they’ve no reason to...” She trailed off as the solution hit her as well.

“They like him,” said Gillette, sounding mystified. “The townspeople like him, is that what you’re saying?”

“Precisely,” said Norrington, a new fierceness in his tightly-drawn expression. “In fact, it is my suspicion that they like him well enough to carry this through.”

Fifteen minutes of planning, including some scribbling on a map of the town and a brief, strange argument between Elizabeth and Gillette about where the most suitable horses could be found, and the brainstorm had borne what they all hoped would be effective fruit. Each with a task, they set out from the Turner household, leaving a slumbering Morgan completely oblivious to the risk her parents were about to take to save the life of her godfather.

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“We’re devils and black sheep, we’re really bad eggs...really, really, spectactularly stinking rotten eggs...”

Jack sat in the dank cellar room which had been expressly commissioned after his last stay in the Port Royal jail. He supposed he ought to feel flattered. He supposed he ought to feel something about his own imminent demise. He’d always thought his life was supposed to be doing that famed flashing thing people were always going on about.

But when he closed his eyes, all he could see was the look on Norrington’s face when he’d come into that tavern. The thought that he’d be robbed of the memory of that stricken expression in just a few hours was almost a comforting one. Of course there was the chance that he’d see it in an endless cycle for the rest of eternity, but Jack preferred not to think of that possibility now any more than he had for the first forty years of his life. If he was damned, he was damned, and it would be the one situation Jack Sparrow couldn’t charm his way out of.
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No, not just the one – Norrington was another. He had the freedom to admit that now, ironically when any hope of physical freedom was gone from him.

He wished he could have taken Norrington sailing on the *Pearl*, introduced one to the other. But that thought, too, led down a useless path. What was the conversation they'd had this morning about wishes? He'd been half-asleep and Norrington had been dismissive. If wishes were horses – no, if wishes were ships. Well, the *Black Pearl* was a wish made real if ever he'd seen one, even if her captain had not proved the same to a certain commodore.

The clank of heavy shoes coming down the stairs interrupted his chain of thought.

"I've said all I have to say," he called out, guessing it was a guard with a priest come to save his immortal soul. Bugger that; they could have it, if they could find it. Asking Norrington might be a good start.

But the man stepping down with a lantern in his hand was not one of the slack-jawed prison guards.

"Fancy a rescue, Captain Sparrow?"

It took Jack a moment and a squint in the dim light, but he managed to recognize the young lieutenant standing with a hip cocked against the wall – the one who'd brought him bread and water in the hold of the *Dauntless* months ago.

A slow grin twitched across his face. "Drink up, me hearties, yo ho..."

In Which All's Well That Ends Well

The morning of Jack Sparrow's execution looked to be dawning bright and clear, though the sky was still too dark to tell for sure. Norrington remembered the first time, the light breeze and how it had not been so unearthly hot. He hoped today's weather would be similar. Each movement he made upon waking struck him as a last: the last time he would rouse himself from this bed, the last time he would dress in these clothes, the last time he would feed a mewing Ned. It was too broad a concept to accept; the only thing he could think of was Jack. In just hours he'd be free, and after that, what happened would happen. Having the weight of the decision lifted form his shoulders was actually something of a relief.

Groves and Gillette met him just outside the fort, the former toying nervously with a sleeve while the latter looked grimly determined. He tried to give them a smile and they tried to return it, but none of them succeeded very well.

"Everything is ready?" said Norrington very quietly.

They nodded. Gillette cleared his throat. "I just want you to know, sir, that it has been an honor serving you." Groves nodded in agreement.

Norrington swallowed hard. "And it has been likewise an honor having men such as yourselves under my command.."

For a frightening moment he thought Gillette was going to hug him, but Groves put a light hand on his companion's elbow. "I believe we have an execution to attend." Faintly whispered, his lips barely moving: "And prevent."

He waited at the gallows as they went to fetch Jack, not trusting himself to go down and see him in that damp cell. Hopefully it hadn't brought on a cough.

After a few minutes Jack was being led forward, his hands cuffed behind him. A thousand things he wanted to say died on Norrington's tongue. Jack looked exactly as he had on that morning he was first supposed to be hanged, dark-eyed and calm, seeming not to care about the noose swinging above him or the burly executioner awaiting his ascent to the platform. His eyes met Norrington's briefly as he climbed the stairs. No one who did not know him would have noticed, but there was a brief flicker of something – recognition, acknowledgment, resolution. Norrington had no chance to respond to it because the executioner was dragging Jack forward, looking like he wanted to lose his breakfast. Jack really had managed to get around town.

This was it – the opportune moment, as Jack would say. Norrington took a step. "Wait," he said sharply. "It is customary to bind the condemned man's hands in front of him." The nearby marines nodded; it was true. The executioner, whose name he had never bothered to learn but whose wife Jack had probably flirted with at some point, shot him a hateful leer for a moment before he forced his face into a blank mask.

"I'll do it," said Norrington. Someone shoved a coil of rope into his hands and he fumbled in his pocket for the key to the irons, willing his fingers to steady. Jack looked at him nonchalantly.

"If you'd be so kind as to hurry it up, Commodore. I've got an appointment to keep, savvy?" He smirked at Norrington and there was muttering from all around them, some of it amused, some of it affronted.

“I wouldn’t be so confident if I were you, Sparrow,” he said icily. “That appointment’s got to be met in a warmer clime than this.”

“Aye,” said Jack with a sigh as Norrington found the key. He spoke over his shoulder as Norrington turned him to unlock the manacles. “That’s why I’m leery o’ keepin’ him waiting, mate.”

Turn the key – there. It would have to be done now. He could see Gillette holding the horse out of the corner of his eye, an easy jump from the platform. A shove against the executioner, who would be too surprised to block it, and –

He found his wrist yanked as Jack spun more quickly than he would have believed possible and then there was a hand freeing the pistol from his belt. He was abruptly facing the small shocked crowd of his men, pressed back against Jack with an arm across his windpipe. The thought occurred to him that that was a smart move – he would have been expected to order them to shoot Jack regardless of his own safety. But what the hell was going on?

“Any man makes a move and the commodore here gets to make his own little trip,” Jack was snarling, slicing the pistol through the air at the soldiers, who leapt back. He awkwardly crab-walked Norrington to the edge of the platform. And there was no doubt he’d thought about being in Jack’s arms again, but this was not quite what he’d had in mind.

Although, dear God, was that – no, Jack couldn’t possibly be *aroused* by all this.

Jack tugged on him and Norrington was no longer turning red just from his restricted breathing.

He caught the dumbstruck expression of Gillette holding the horse – carefully constructed, of course – for an instant as Jack levered them down into the saddle. Norrington let out a puff of air as his throat was released and he slumped forward. With a kick and a yell, Jack spurred the horse into a burst of speed, and there was no longer any need to worry about embarrassing arousals because this saddle was *definitely* not built for two.

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Gillette stared after them as Groves came up beside him. “Well, will you look at that.”

“Indeed,” said Gillette. “After them, I suppose?” Only Groves saw the sardonic quirk of an eyebrow. They split the contingent in two and took opposite paths out of the fort.

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“This way?” Jack muttered in Norrington’s ear as they came to a crossroads.

He barely had breath enough to answer with the erratic pace of the horse. “Yes. Jack, what –”

“Haven’t got time for a chat, love. Just try not to pass out on me and all will make sense in due time.”

“Stupid – wordy – pirate...” The horse jumped over a wayward wooden crate and Norrington, slammed into the pommel, began to turn green.

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The men following Groves skidded to a halt as they reached a fracas in the middle of the street, just outside the baker’s cottage.
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“Look at what you’ve done to my father’s carriage!” Elizabeth Turner shrieked at the top of her lungs, accompanied by her nurse and an equally irate infant. Her husband, a tall coachman, and the commodore’s housekeeper were busy tossing rolls at members of the baker’s family. Everyone was covered in flour from a few burst bags that had fallen out of the baker’s wagon when it collided with the governor’s fine carriage.

Groves turned to the flabbergasted men. “It looks as though we’ll have to go around, then. Onward!” Chickens invaded the disaster zone, pecking at bits of biscuit and squawking indignantly, as Groves retreated down another street.

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“Sir, are you certain this is the way to the docks –”

Gillette drew himself up haughtily. “I don’t believe you have ever chased Jack Sparrow through the streets of Port Royal, Mr. Mauthus. I know the evasive snake unfortunately better than I’d like, and I know he would go *this* way.”

It was only fear of the kidnapped commodore’s punishments for disrespect that kept the men silent when they hit a dead end two minutes later. They were all quite fond of their rum rations.

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“It’s here, no?”

Norrington could only groan and cling to the sweat-soaked horse’s neck as Jack hauled back on the reins. Jack clucked his tongue. “Forgive me.”

“For – what?” Norrington gasped out.

“For this.” Jack shoved him hard and he tumbled to the ground, striking his head on a rock.

Jack crouched next him as he blinked stars from his vision. “Sorry, sorry –” Kisses all over his face, messy and quick. Jack pulled away to study the cut on his brow. Norrington reached up to wipe away the blood threatening to drip into his eye, but Jack grabbed his hand.

“Has to look presentable.”

“What –” Jack was kissing him again, nibbling at his earlobe, pressing lips to the tip of his nose. “What just happened?”

He caught Jack’s face in both hands, stilling him but for the grin stretched across it. “Change of plans, mate. Think I was gonna let you go down for me?” Scooting forward into his lap, Jack nuzzled at his neck. “*On* me, yeah, but that’s somewhat different.”

Norrington tried to slow his breathing, but Jack’s roving kisses were not helping. “But I was – I was prepared –”

A sudden stop, black eyes gazing intently into his own. “I wasn’t.”

The tightness in his chest eased even as a new ache began to take its place. He wrapped his arms around Jack, who responded in kind, holding a rough cheek to his own.

“A few moments more,” Jack murmured. “We’ve led them on a merry chase.”

Norrington found the parted lips and kissed him deeply, drowning in the sensations of eagerly

delving tongue, drinking in the taste of treasure. Jack was breathing shallowly when they broke, his chest rising against Norrington's, his hands clutching Norrington's shoulders.

Kissing his closed eyelids, Norrington whispered, "I suppose this is goodbye."

Jack shot to his feet as his eyes opened. "You –" He pointed wildly at Norrington. "You are *still* an idiot!"

Mystified and hurt, Norrington got up as well, somewhat gingerly. He suspected that riding would not be an enjoyable activity for quite some time after this morning. "There's no need to insult me."

Jack heaved a frustrated sigh and pulled him close. "I will be back in three weeks," he said very slowly, as if he were indeed speaking to an idiot. "I'll come at night, and I'll sneak up to your room, and say hello to the kitten, and we'll have a bit of a sport before I steal you away to warm my bed for awhile."

It was not the first time Jack Sparrow had rendered him speechless, and he doubted very much it would be the last. The most logical course of action, then, would be to kiss him again, since his lips were pouting and it would be three weeks before he'd get to ravish them for it again.

"Hmm," Jack breathed against him. "I've a mind to take you with me now, 'cept then there'd be no one to watch over the whelp and the spitfire and the bairn."

"I have to do it?" Jack nodded, distracted by the curve of Norrington's jaw and lowering his mouth to it. Norrington let out a small noise against his hair. There were hands moving down his back, hands on his sore backside and oh, they were amazingly soothing... "They won't listen to me the – the way they listen to you..."

Jack grinned, his eyes lighting when Norrington met it with his own smile. He gave Norrington's arse a squeeze. "They'll learn. And I suggest we put a stop to all this revelry for the moment, because there's not enough time for proper attention to the poor commodore's frayed nerves."

He was coming back, but first he was leaving. Norrington's grip tightened. "Jack, I –"

"Me too," said Jack before he could finish. His face was animated, but his eyes were sober enough to match the import of his words. "But don't say it now, 's bad luck. Save it for when I've got you begging and panting on my lovely ship."

Another bruising, burning kiss and he was darting away, running full-tilt down the beach. Norrington closed his eyes and touched a hand to his mouth, startled into a squeak when he was suddenly seized and kissed again.

"Love you." Jack gave him one final peck, a last wicked grin, and took off again.

Norrington stood there sputtering for a moment. That lying, thieving, pillaging, selfish son of a –

"Jack!" he bellowed, not daring to run after him, since he was already to the water. Jack turned and waved amidst the sun-flashing waves. Then he dove back under, heading for the *Black Pearl* lurking around the corner of the cove.

Save it for next time, would he? Well, it wasn't going to be Norrington doing the begging when he got his hands on Jack Sparrow again, that was for certain.

He spent a few minutes planning giddy revenge before a pair of lieutenants trotted up to him, followed by twenty or so gasping men. The *Pearl* was making good time, speeding away from

their waters with all the grace Jack was so proud of.

“Blast it,” said Groves blandly. “They’re out of range. What a shame.”

“All right, sir?” Gillette asked, noticing the barely-felt cut on his temple.

Norrington watched the speck of black on the horizon, narrowing his eyes against the sun. “Better than I ever believed I could be,” he said, the hint of the smile Jack had spent so much effort coaxing out of him breaking across his face.

He'd caught a pirate and let him go, the promise of return stretching between them. It was a promise worth the risk, worth his career, worth his own life -- but after today, he couldn't quite fear that possibility. Whatever manner of luck Jack carried was his now too, as much as the man himself. They would take that luck and make the most of it, for as long as they could, come wind and water and biting, scratching kittens.

Outtake: Pirates Sail and Lost Boys Fly

Chapter Notes

> An outtake that didn't quite fit into the story. Title from the Dixie Chicks' "Godspeed (Sweet Dreams)."

Norrington was surrounded by peaceful slumberers, but he was too intent on watching them to rest his own eyes.

Ned was in his lap, against the knees he'd pressed tight together. Norrington had never seen a cat sleep flat on its back, legs flopped carelessly out. Annabelle had generally favored a hunch-backed crouch, feet tucked neatly beneath herself, that he thought of as "the pudding." The only thing he could think to compare Ned's aimless sprawl with was the man beside him.

Jack slept like a small child, one moment taking up more space than a man twice his size and the next shrinking, his knees up to his chin and his arms wrapped around his legs. He had no qualms about climbing aboard Norrington as if he were a cushion with limbs, or twisting around so that his feet kicked at the pillows and Norrington's own head. Right now he was on his stomach, one leg hanging off the bed. Careful not to disturb the kitten in his lap, Norrington reached out to tug him more securely close.

After a brief grumble Jack relaxed again, stretching out alongside him and sliding an arm around his waist. Norrington stroked Ned's throat with one hand, feeling a faint purr thrum against his fingertips, and straightened Jack's hair with the other. He could blame the tangled mess for his being continually tormented by a pouncing orange menace. Ned had found his ideal hunting grounds and he was not limited to striking during daylight hours. It was usually only Norrington himself shocked awake by sneak attacks in the dead of night; Jack had an irritating tendency to sleep through them.

An eye popped open and Jack fluttered long lashes at the kitten.

"Finally tuckered out, is he?" He lifted his head to rub his nose in Ned's soft belly, jerking back before back legs could kick his face in reflex.

"He's had a long day of scampering about," said Norrington, opening his arms to let Jack scoot in against him.

Jack tucked his head under Norrington's chin. "As have we. Or a long night, rather."

Norrington pressed a smile into Jack's dark hair. "Indeed."

"So why aren't you sleepin' then?" Jack inquired, his hands running over Norrington's body with a proprietary air. "I mean, I could try for one more go, but a body can only last so long..."

Norrington squeezed that undeniably welcome body to him. "No, I'm exhausted enough that you just might finish me off."

"Would be quite the way to go, though, eh?"

“Aye,” Norrington replied with a quiet mocking laugh.

Jack swatted him on the arm and pushed himself up to look Norrington in the eye, his face grave. “Sleep,” he commanded, waving a hand around. “Obey your elders.” Norrington obligingly closed his eyes under the fingertips smoothing out his brow. After a moment, Jack pinched his ear. “You’re not asleep.”

“Your hand smells like oranges,” Norrington told him reproachfully.

Jack snatched it back, flashing Norrington a guilty grin as he opened his eyes. “I might’ve sampled a few.”

“They’re not ripe yet,” he scolded.

“Well, I didn’t say they were any *good*,” Jack replied, hooking his arm around Norrington’s neck and drawing him down again. Somewhere in the midst of drowsy kissing, a jostled Ned abandoned them, leaping off the bed with an reproachful mew.

Norrington released Jack’s mouth long enough to murmur, “You’ve upset the master of the house.”

“Bah,” said Jack, flicking a tongue out to bathe his bottom lip. “Not a sight for feline eyes, anyhow.” A hand skimmed down to his waist and hovered before Jack shook his head slightly. “I really *am* that weary,” he admitted, giving Norrington a regretful stroke. It was telling enough that Norrington felt only the barest twinge of reaction.

“I like this too,” he said, dropping another kiss on Jack’s full lips, suddenly embarrassed at coming across as having such a lustful spirit that not even the notoriously randy Jack Sparrow could satisfy it.

Jack snuggled closer to him and ran a thumb across his cheek. “Aye, nothing wrong with being worn out for a worthy cause.” He turned, settling back against Norrington, who slipped an arm around him and breathed a contented sigh against his nape.

A thump warned them of Ned’s arrival on the bed. Instead of launching himself at the two half-asleep men, he wriggled between them, pawed at the pillow and Jack’s beads a few times, and finally curled up to sleep, making a nest out of black braids and rubbing his head against Norrington’s nose.

“Still not entirely certain we shouldn’t stew him for dinner,” Jack grumped, flinching as partially sheathed claws kneaded his neck.

“Hush, he’s only a baby,” Norrington replied, catching Jack’s hand. “And you were the one who brought him home.”

“Suppose I did,” said Jack, yawning widely. “And he’s taken to you as badly as I have. Sweet dreams, commodore o’ mine.”

Mine, Norrington thought in sleepy triumph, even as he said, “I’ve no need for them just now."

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